

THE ARGOSY.

FEBRUARY, 1886.

LADY VALERIA.

CHAPTER V.

WIZARD'S GOLD.

"AND the next morning, when he awoke and looked, behold! all the gold he had gained by his bargain was turned into dead leaves."

A fragment of a long-forgotten fairy tale of his boyish days; long-forgotten, till Edric Poynter woke next morning with the words on his lips.

It was absurd that it should rise to his recollection, word for word now, yet not more absurd than all that had befallen him throughout the long hours of the past night.

All the day's experiences had been lived through again in a wild fantastic guise. He had been standing in the dark church of St. Fridolin's—knee-deep in golden coins, of which he was frantically offering handfuls—for what? He could not tell, nor would the dark veiled figure on the altar steps answer him when he asked it. "Not for Gold, nor Love," said Euphrosyne's voice, and the dark veil melted, leaving Mrs. Damien smiling at him. "Not the price of a single rose amongst it all," she said and passed on, her arms full of crimson flowers. Then Elsie Paramount's pretty pale face gazed mournfully out of the gloom, holding the thorny stem to her breast. "Withered and gone;" and she sighed herself away, and the air was filled with the scent of dying roses, or the faint, subtle perfume that had exhaled from Euphrosyne's garments, that the touch of her fingers had left on his over night, and the dead leaves rustled down—down—down.

The level sun-rays of a last May morning flooded his room as he awoke, steeping him in their wizard's gold to the chin; the rustle of the leaves was the light fall of wood ash from his newly lighted fire, and the shadowy form grew definite as that of private Carver, his soldier servant, announcing the fact that it was "A quarter to five, sir."

A hasty plunge into uniform, a sharp walk to the ranges, and the

anxieties attendant on the shooting of a party of two score recruits, left him no time to pursue the fable to its application. And when, on his return after a second and more deliberate toilette, he entered the mess-room in search of breakfast and letters, the sight of a dainty little envelope in the rack wiped away from his memory even the uncomfortable thrill with which he had first missed the tiger's claw from his watch-chain.

A gracious little note repeating Mrs. Damien's invitation to dinner, the "At Home" card for the same evening, and a visiting card with the new address deeply underscored. Three actual, tangible treasures. He was not the churl to grudge their price. He was still schoolboy enough to have made a red mark against "Monday the 5th" in the calendar that hung on his wall, and to have scored off right joyfully this first intervening day. Only five more, and yet, with the perversity of human nature, he almost quarrelled with the brief interval. Had it been longer, then he might have contrived to interpose a call, in place of the one of which he had been defrauded.

He couldn't very well do so now, of course, but there were the Archdales. Why had he not thought of them sooner? They were very great friends of hers, she had said. He ought to call there at any rate, and, by some blessed chance, he might possibly meet her there, or, at least, hear of her: either of which alone, in his present frame of mind, he counted worth the trouble of the journey three times told.

It was curious, and not exactly pleasant, to find himself once more speeding towards again by the same train, and on a similar errand to that of three days ago. Only three days, and what a changed outlook! He remembered half-incredulously his misgivings, his savage desperation born of constant thwarting, his hot and cold shy fits.

Then he was painfully groping for the dropped end of a cobweb thread of chance acquaintanceship.

Now he held on to a silken cord of friendliness and mutual interests. His place, though possibly a humble one, in Mrs. Damien's regard, was secured. His welcome was certain; his absence would be noted.

A marvellous change. A gain so great that he would be a churl to grudge the price. After all—what was it?

"As much and no more than I do for you," the woman had said. Moderate, certainly; but he wished she had made it a cash payment. She was welcome to any help he could give her of course, but he didn't see quite what form his help could take. Some superstitious fancy he supposed. Even so. She had been obeying the leading of a superstitious fancy in his case, and what had been the result? Why should she not be as fortunate in her own?

How did she work it? Chiromancy? Edric opened his strong young hand with its square-tipped fingers, and gazed perplexedly at the criss-cross lines of the palm. "Line of Life, Line of the Heart,

Line of the Liver. Mounts of Jupiter, Saturn, Venus." He had made them all out by the help of a book ; but neither date nor address could he get out of any of them !

Astrology ? That was more possible. But, according to the encyclopædia, that could only be worked with a sort of celestial globe turned inside out ; an almanac, compasses, and quadrants, and a whole cart-load of "plant," which she certainly did not bear concealed about her person on that occasion. "Written on your forehead." That was a decidedly uncomfortable thing to consider, and Edric involuntarily removed his hat, and gave his sun-tanned brow and close clipped fair locks a rub or two as he reflected on it.

"I don't seem to see it, and the more I look at it the less I like it," was his rather obscure conclusion, as the train stopped at Charing Cross, and he gave an involuntary unquiet glance around before he left the carriage.

No fresh adventure awaited him. The station had returned to its normal aspect, and he arrived in due course in Lady Archdale's drawing-room, awaiting the appearance of his hostess.

It was not a pleasant room to wait in by any means. Square and precise, doing much credit to the labours of the housemaid. Every chair seemed to stand on its own pattern of the carpet, either half of the chimney piece and chiffonier reflected the other half with unerring exactness. Everything was one of a set or a pair ; and when Edric placed himself at one end of the centre ottoman he felt quite afflicted at the unsymmetrical effect, and wished he had brought another man in a grey suit to match, with his stick and legs at corresponding angles, to balance him at the other end. Even the flowers looked prim in their tidy pyramid on one table, and neat little tufts here and there.

He sat for some time with tolerable patience, amusing himself with mental fancy portraits of the "Miss Archdale" whom Mrs. Damien had mentioned. She would look as old as her mamma, he decided, and be dressed very much like her. They would occupy those two low chairs on either side of the window, and make alternate little speeches to him, like versicle and response, and he would keep his eyes on the clock, and depart in exactly fifteen minutes after their appearance.

Here a door grated on its hinges, and there entered, with stately step and slow, a magnificent blood-hound, deep-chested, tawny-muzzled, with careworn lines in his wise old face. He walked solemnly up to Edric, and sniffed him carefully ; then, throwing his head back, would have made some remark, but checked himself suddenly, and sat down with a flop. Edric made some friendly advances, which met with no response. After a minute or two the dog got up, and looked him over again exhaustively.

"What are you ?" he said as plainly as dog could speak. "You smell honest. You don't belong here. You're not a visitor, for nobody's entertaining you. Why don't you go and tune the piano,

or take the gas-meter, or do something to account for your presence?"

"I want to see your mistress, old fellow," said Edric, answering him. "Just fetch her, will you?"

The hound gave a sudden wriggle and wag of his long smooth tail. "Come along," it said, and he stepped briskly back to the door by which he had entered, scratched it wider open, shoved aside a portière, and looked over his shoulder with an air of invitation as he did so.

Edric hesitated, then followed, and beheld a pretty little interior, with a half-blocked-up north light, an easel filling nearly all the available space, and the back of a young lady in a brown holland pinafore, with her right sleeve rolled up to her elbow, painting in some minute detail on a large canvas with absorbed intentness. The dog was evidently too well-trained to touch her, but he sat down as close as he dared and gave a meaning snatch of a whimper.

"Good old Cuss! What is it?" she answered him, putting her left hand back to caress him. He took it in his big red jaw as softly as any retriever and gave it a gentle tug.

"Anything wrong? Is Puss looking at the love birds? Well, why don't you frighten her? Oh, I forgot the mistress's headache. I must come, must I?" And to Edric's untold relief she laid aside her brush, and rose.

"Miss Archdale—?" hesitated Edric, in surprise.

"Mr. Poynter?" asked the young lady, holding her hand out frankly, as if pretty sure of the fact.

Hester Archdale was not beautiful. A little nut-brown maid with straight dark eyebrows above quick-glancing wide-open eyes, a saucy nose and a determined chin, a bewitching little mouth that took fifty different expressions in as many seconds, and not an ugly curve amongst them all, with gleaming, small white teeth and a dimple at the corner. A straight, slender, alert young creature, who looked physically incapable of being sad, or bored, or fretful, whose laugh was as exhilarating to hear as a blackbird's song when the cherries hang ripe, and whose face was as pleasant to look on as a bunch of fresh-plucked cowslips.

"Your card was brought to me ten minutes ago," she went on; "but I had no idea that you were alone here. I suppose my father is out. My mother is not well enough to see anyone to-day."

"Cuss has been doing the honours——"

"Hush! You are not to know *that* name. Daddy gave it him because he was born on Ash Wednesday, and while we were with the regiment it didn't matter. But now he is in society mamma won't have it; so to the public he is Roswal, and only gets his own name for a treat now and then, when we are quite alone. Eh, Cuss?"

The great hound had been standing looking from one to the other with a comprehending gaze in his red eyes, and now considering the

introduction made and the subject disposed of, stretched out his two huge paws in front, and yawned a mighty yawn, like the gape of an heraldic lion, then swallowed a deep bass bark hastily.

"Good boy. He knows his mistress is ill. Do you care to see his portrait?" Hester asked, leading the way back to her studio.

"If I do not interrupt your work——"

"Not a bit. I am only spoiling it, going on with tired eyes."

She threw open the shutters and turned her canvas to the light. It contained two figures. Roswal dashing through a bit of tangled thicket in the act of springing on a small boy in doublet and hose, who, his tiny toy-sword raised on high, was attempting to defend himself. The dog was nearly finished, well and spiritedly done. The child scarcely more than an outline.

"I hope you recognise the scene. The hound and the young Buccleuch?" Then, seeing Edric's doubtful look, she picked up "The Lay of the Last Minstrel," and read:—

"I ween you then had seen with joy
The bearing of that gallant boy,
Well worthy of his noble sire,
His wet cheek glowed 'twixt fear and ire,
He held his little bat on high,
And faced the bloodhound manfully."

"But it's no good," she broke off suddenly; "I shall never get the expression," tossing the book down despairingly. "Cuss *won't* glare (you *know* you won't, old Softy), and look at his paw!"

"It's a very good paw."

"But the muscles ought to distend somehow, as if he meant tearing and rending; but nothing on earth will induce him to lay anything but a velvet touch on Jock."

"The boy, you mean? He looks like a portrait, and a good one."

"My brother, the ugliest child alive, only mamma can't perceive it. As I had to paint him for her, I thought the situation might invest him with sentiment. He can look like a small hero on occasion."

Cuss here looked from one to the other, as much as to say, "Why don't you sit down?" and flopped down himself by way of example, with a hospitable wave of his tail.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" Hester cried, when Edric demurred; "and so will Daddy be if you can't wait to see him. There is so much that we are longing to ask you."

She had swept a pile of parti-coloured drapery off the only other chair in the studio, and Edric gladly seated himself, declaring his readiness to submit to any amount of cross-examination.

"Tell me what sort of a C.O. Colonel Borrodale makes, and what induced Major Bellasys to retire—we never could understand that." And so forth and so forth she ran on, showing a most amazingly

complete acquaintance with the interior economy of the regiment, its movements and politics. They had talked themselves into thorough good-fellowship, these two young people, before Edric again reluctantly rose to depart.

"Dear old Daddy, wouldn't he be back again with you if he could!" she sighed, when her questions and his answers were alike exhausted. "Good-bye then, if you must go? There is one more point on which I *should* have liked to have satisfied my mind; but, perhaps ——"

"And that is ——?"

"Rose—Mrs. Damien told me——" He resumed his seat at once; the reward that he had promised to himself had at last surely come. "She would have given anything to know—what business you had in St. Fridolin's last Monday."

Edric very nearly jumped up again and fled. He could have done so quite gracefully, for Hester had only flung the question at him lightly as it were, with a laugh and a gay little glance, that left it possible for him to reply as lightly. The answer did not come readily, however. He began it, checked himself, pulled his moustache and looked at her consideringly with his honest blue eyes. Then almost as much to his own surprise as hers, broke out with:

"I'll tell you all about it; the whole truth from beginning to end, if you don't mind listening; for I'm bothered, horribly bothered about it all, and more by having to keep it to myself than by anything else."

Hester's eyes opened wide at this exordium, as well they might; but she said nothing; merely dropped her hand on Cuss's head and listened for more. The ice broken, Edric dived in boldly. He had perforce kept silent till then on his experiences, as much on Mrs. Damien's account as his own; also from the little hope he had of any possible assistance from his usual associates. But now, this bright, capable little maiden, with her candid eyes and trust-inspiring manner, seemed the very fittest of confidants. It was so easy to tell her everything, somehow. She had such a pleasant way of listening; a wise, considering little air; evidently not laughing at him, nor thrilled, nor absorbed; only bent on getting all the facts clear before her, and forming a just conclusion on them. The adventure sounded much less romantic and portentous when he heard himself relate it—with certain necessary modifications and abridgments as concerned his own part therein—but just as puzzling.

"Now tell me what you think about it."

"I think she has made a good bargain," said downright Hester. "She found you were looking for Rose, and happened to know where to find her, and you have given her a sort of blank cheque in repayment."

"But how did she know what I wanted?"

"Followed you—asked Miss Cadogan's housemaid—the man at

the post-office. Any woman with her wits about her could have done as much."

"But *why* did she follow me?"

"Ah! that's the real puzzle of the whole, and I give it up. You will know when you hear from her again. I hope you will tell me the end."

"Of course. Only please don't mention it to Mrs. Damien. I feel somehow responsible for bringing her and that woman together, and it has troubled me more than I can tell you. How *could* she know Mrs. Damien existed?"

"Oh, Rose knows all sorts of queer people at St. Fridolin's. I wouldn't distress myself about that. You'll find most likely that you'll be called upon to pay two pounds twelve and sixpence, the exact sum required to prevent a sick husband and five starving children from being turned into the street. Or she'll want you to buy some new patent toothpick or beetle-destroyer, or cigar-holder—a reduction on taking a quantity—or four large oil-paintings, the last works of her defunct husband. Why, my dear—" Hester stopped in full swing, blushing furiously. "I beg your pardon. I really forgot for a moment that I was not giving Daddy the benefit of my knowledge of the world's pitfalls."

Edric smiled pleasantly. "Thank you very much. We shall meet on Monday, shall we not? I will tell you the end of my adventure if I ever arrive at it. Good bye."

"Good bye," said Hester, with downcast eyes and a grave shake of the hand. Roswal looked up, as if to say, "I've heard that remark three times before. Does he *really* mean going at last?" and finding Edric actually departing, saw him politely off the premises and returned to the studio. There, to his surprise, his usually dignified little mistress dropped on the floor beside him, and giving him a passionate hug, cried, with her eyes hidden in the thick, soft wrinkles of his neck: "Oh Cuss! dear, dear old Cuss! Never tell anybody how foolish I looked just now. Wasn't it nice of him not to laugh too much? Cuss, I hope he'll get into no scrape. Shouldn't you like to go and take care of him? And oh, Cuss, won't it be nice to see him again next Monday?"

Edric caught his train, well satisfied with his afternoon's work. He found two other officers from Shorncliffe in his carriage.

"Heard the news, Poynter?" asked one of them, his great friend, Major Carroll. "We're off at last."

"Off? When? Where?"

"Next week, perhaps. To Portsmouth."

"Next week? Oh, come! Who started that shave?" asked he, with a dismal attempt to look sceptical.

"I didn't. And it isn't a shave. Not at all. Doudney knows all about it. He always does. Cabinet ministers invariably confide in Doudney, don't you know. Portsmouth means Egypt, and Egypt means fighting. Now don't you see?"

"Doudney's friends in the Cabinet have sold him before now," was all Edric's reply, but the news sounded true to him this time. And when he re-entered his hut, at the sight of his three precious treasures lying on his writing-table, the moral of his old fairy tale rushed back into his memory, and he seemed to see the golden promise of his days to come falling into sere and dead leaves before his eyes.

And, as Hester said, he had given a blank cheque in payment.

CHAPTER VI.

ST. FRIDOLIN THE HERMIT. (RETROSPECTIVE.)

WHEN Edric, greedily counting his golden moments by Mrs. Damien's side in the churchyard of St. Fridolin's had resentfully grudged but one of them to the mention of its Vicar, little he guessed that with the coming of Eustace Stannard to St. Fridolin's, a long twelvemonth ago, began the weaving of that web into which he insensibly but surely was even then being drawn.

Twelve months ago. Just at the time that he, on board the Indian troopship, impatiently counted the days that lay between him and England; just at the time when Rose Damien in the height of the gay London season began to weary a little of its excitement and sigh for fresh worlds to conquer; two strands drawn all unconsciously by the finger of fate, one from the East and one from the West, to meet and mingle at their appointed time: while a third—Euphrosyne—dark, watchful, grimly patient, bided her turn awaiting the dawning of the chance that must so surely come to her. Just at that time began the story of the Vicar's coming to St. Fridolin's.

It must needs be told here, and the events which followed it, in as brief a retrospect as may be.

A year ago, then, Edric might have read in one of the leading journals of the day the following paragraph:—

"It is with considerable surprise and deep regret that the congregation of St. Ermentrude's have received the news of the resignation of their Vicar, the Hon. and Rev. Eustace Stannard, who has held the living for barely twelve months. Mr. Stannard has made his mark as one of the most powerful and eloquent preachers of the time. Rumours have been current that the vacant stall of St. Stephen's was about to be offered him, but these, we believe, will prove to be unfounded, as it is understood that the reverend gentleman intends to reside abroad for some years. It will be remembered as a curious coincidence that Mr. Stannard's father, Lord Altcar (then Mr. Redgrave Stannard), retired from public life with the same startling unexpectedness when the highest prizes of his political career lay within his reach."

There were variations on the theme, of course. "Another Secession to Rome," announced the *Grindstone*. "Overwork and affection of the brain," deplored the *Acolyte*. The *Upper Ten* hinted in horror-struck italics at "The simultaneous disappearance of a lovely

peeress of Ritualistic views, a regular attendant at St. Ermentrude's ; " while *Veracity* demanded, " Who receives and checks the accounts of the offertories ? " and, " Whether a certain reverend gentleman's connection with the Turf had not been for many years an open secret ? "

It was a curious testimony to the man's character that society, as a rule, took these more exciting suggestions for what they were worth, and decided that neither love nor money was the moving spring of Eustace Stannard's unexpected proceeding, and contented itself with marvelling greatly thereat. Had the truth been known the marvel would have been greater still. It would have been the last idea to occur to society that Eustace Stannard, its spoilt favourite, was only tired of *it*. But so it was. His career, from his earliest college days, had been such a brilliant series of successes—successes won at so little cost to himself—that he grew first amazed, then doubtful, then cynical and despondent.

It was his nature to be keenly critical of his own work, and bitterly conscious of his own shortcomings. The praise of men—except those whose judgment he happened to respect—was pain and shame to him, and indiscriminate admiration a positive affront. Society would not be debarred from its bestowal, nevertheless, let him receive it never so ungraciously. St. Ermentrude's was thronged to suffocation by the most select of fashionable mobs on the Sundays when it was known he was to preach. He was quoted, reported, imitated, discussed in society papers till human nature could bear no more.

In a fit of sudden mistrust of himself, his work, and the genuineness of his mission, he sent in his resignation to the Bishop and started off in search of some world-forgotten spot where no man should have heard of St. Ermentrude's, or care whether he was Lord Altcar's eldest son or not ; where he should be able to get at the real, not the fictitious value of his work, find peace and quiet, and write articles in the *Church Quarterly*.

When an early Christian found the temptations of the world too many for him, he was wont, we are told, to bid adieu to Rome, Byzantium, or Alexandria, as the case might be, and seek in the mountains or desert a place for meditation and self-communion.

Eustace Stannard went into the City.

In less than a month after his resignation of St. Ermentrude's ; when his wondering friends had talked the subject out and tired of it ; he revived their flagging interest by appearing in town again, and a few weeks later was inducted into the living of St. Fridolin the Hermit, situated no man in society except the Bishop knew where.

Let no man look to see St. Fridolin's church as Eustace Stannard's eyes beheld it first in those days of mid-June. It has gone ; vanished from the face of the earth as completely as the cell of St. Fridolin himself. It had a grey old tower that had survived the destruction of the original building in the great fire, in which swung a brazen turn-

coat of a bell whose many sins might well have cracked it. A bell that had rung "for joye" at the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, and later on had rung back King James from Faversham, and rung in King William from Holland with equal enthusiasm.

The body of the church had been restored by some unknown follower of Wren, in humble imitation of a classic temple. Bald and uninteresting without, within it was dingily magnificent with dark wood-work and tarnished gilding. A great, black, undecipherable altar-piece, devoutly believed in as a Carlo Maratti, was surmounted by two smirking gilded angels, between which a dilapidated pelican pecked at her tarnished breast, under a mean window containing the arms of the Worshipful Company of Cheesemongers.

Mr. Paramount, the little old Churchwarden, still speaks of St. Fridolin's as an interior unequalled in its chaste magnificence and solemn splendour since the days of Solomon's Temple. It was, therefore, somewhat of a shock to him, after making it his duty to explain to the new Vicar that he should resolutely oppose any modern Ritualistic innovations or decorations, crosses, altar lights, or flowers, which he protested against as "unlicensed ornament and unauthorised symbol," to have his attention rather sharply directed to the pelican, the window with "Azure, three cheeses in dexter chief Or, &c.," and the three colossal Christian Graces, adorning the monument to a departed Vicar, and to be asked where he found "unlicensed ornament and unauthorised symbol" if not here?

He retreated from the discussion silenced if not exactly convinced, and Eustace wondered for a day and a half what he could possibly have said to affront the old gentleman.

Close by the church, within the churchyard bounds, stood the Vicarage, in which no Vicar had dwelt for generations. It was a dreary abode, with faded paintings and dusty carvings, with shut-up rooms, ghostly with the relics of dead-and-gone occupants, and crooked passages haunted by unaccountable echoes. It suited the Vicar's work, and perhaps his mood. He furnished as much as he absolutely required, and installed in charge his tidy old housekeeper, Mrs. Good-liffe: to whose orderly soul he brought daily tribulation by never coming in for a regular meal, and encouraging the inroads of all sorts of undesirable parishioners over her snowy doorsteps and immaculate oil-cloth. Here, as the year rolled on, he lived his busy monotonous, unjoyous life, as secluded from human intercourse beyond the parish bounds as if he had been the original Fridolin the Anker (*i.e.*, hermit), who, as the parish records told, built the church and his cell in the marshes adjoining four centuries ago.

Now according to all precedent no hermit's existence could be considered complete without the temptations of emissaries from the outer world striving by lure and guile to win back their lost companion. These were not lacking to Mr. Stannard had he found time or inclination to heed them. There followed him at first a certain influx of

worshippers from the West—such of his late congregation as had carriages, that is to say—filling the tall pews with marvels of art millinery, and leaving suggestions of Piesse and Lubin about the fusty, doomed green baize. He was not at all gratified by their devotion: in fact, felt a certain grim pleasure in watching the numbers diminishing as the season waned, leaving place for the congregation he wished to draw to him.

September came and went, and he might have thought himself safe, for town was empty and the wicked world disporting itself abroad over the face of the innocent country. One day is very like another in St. Fridolin's. But Eustace was country-bred, and even there felt the air charged with hints of moorland and heather, of tramps over the crackling stubble, and the sharp ring of guns amongst the yellowing copses. In town it was a day of semi-fog, and he had preached his morning sermon to an almost invisible congregation.

"Don't you know me, or *won't* you know me?" asked a voice of him suddenly, as he left the church by the vestry door. A figure in the fog, that seemed to lift and lighten as she approached, an outstretched hand—a voice of silver—and the fairest face eyes ever looked upon. He touched the slim fingers doubtfully.

"I beg your pardon, if for a moment I had forgotten you. You belong to the days that seem so far away now. What has brought you to St. Fridolin's?"

She looked full at him with two great lovely inscrutable eyes. Eyes at once radiant with purpose and sparkling with fun. A long, steady, regal gaze, as of one who felt her notice an honour.

"You are not at all pleased to see me here," she said, with her usual directness and a flash of superb astonishment in the violet eyes at the astounding discovery.

"If you mean *there*"—and he indicated the church—"I know many others whom I would sooner meet. Those who have a better right there."

"But will they come?" asked Mrs. Damien, like Hotspur.

"If I can bring them in. That is what I am here for."

"And can no one help you? Is there no work that anyone—that I might do?"

The Vicar glanced at the velvet gown and many-buttoned gloves of his would-be helper, and smiled with ironical pity.

"District-visiting? In a brougham, with a footman to hand round the tracts? Thank you. I am afraid we are hardly prepared for that yet at St. Fridolin's. I beg your pardon," he added hastily; "that was an unworthy speech. Forgive it. Why *should* I refuse help so frankly offered? I really don't see, though, what *you* can do for us."

Queen Rose looked so suspiciously meek that the Vicar might have known she felt sure of getting her way.

"If you really think there is not a person here who would be the better for my help and friendship, I am answered," she said softly.

The Vicar looked at her consideringly. Perhaps then, for the first time, his perceptions received any distinct impression of her individuality. She had been erstwhile one of the undistinguishable flock of brilliant creatures who used to madden him with their admiration and soft incense of flattery; who came to him on Sunday to be excited and thrilled, as they went on a week-day to the last new play; ready, when the time came, to desert him and his teaching at a day's notice for some newer attraction. The woman who stood before him was of a different clay. More beautiful, if that mattered; more purposeful, more capable. She would either help or hinder him mightily, he felt; and somehow he suspected it would be the latter.

"How do you mean to begin?" he asked at length. Mrs. Damien's eyes danced under their down-dropped lashes.

"Can't you give me an introduction to somebody who belongs here? I want some new friends. I have exhausted one phase of English society pretty much, I think; I should like to see another. Don't you think some people here might care to know me and let me be friends with them?"

"I should think they might," admitted the Vicar, slowly and much against his will. He was irate with himself for watching the play of her beautiful lips, and noticing the soft, dark sweep of her eyelashes against her cheek. The great eyes flashed up suddenly at him all alight with eagerness and bright thoughts, but dropped again under his dark scrutiny.

"You had better consult Mr. de Cressy. He shall call upon you to-morrow." And then Mr. Stannard bade her a stiff adieu, feeling rather as if he had taken some unknown compound into his hands that might prove valuable, or might go off with sudden explosion and blow him and his to utter destruction.

"A fine lady's freak," he muttered consolingly, "and not likely to prove a lasting one."

CHAPTER VII.

A BLACK SEVEN. (RETROSPECTIVE.)

THERE were other and more dangerous elements fermenting under the surface calm of his parish, had he but known it, and he came very nigh upon touching on some of them the very next day.

It was on that occasion that he discovered Lavender Row.

It was no small achievement for a stranger, such as he was. From Lavender Row to the busiest thoroughfare in the City is but a stone-cast, and yet men have lived their working days through from year's end to year's end unaware of its existence.

There is a restaurant and a public-house in the neighbourhood, whose inhabitants might direct an explorer; but the clerks in the

offices of the Nicaraguan and Inter-Oceanic Tramcars Company, Limited, occupying the first floor of the classic pile which is its next door neighbour, though they could, if it so pleased them, drop pebbles from their plate-glass back windows down its crooked chimneys, might be puzzled to arrive at them by any other route. A little passage, one-flag wide, with a post in the middle, leads down beside the restaurant to a two-flag-wide court, one side of which is formed by a blank sooty wall, behind which an engine, hard at some unknown work, measures the minutes away with alternate stamp and clatter all day long. Facing it stands Lavender Row, one of the last bits of the London of the last Edward.

Three little low tile-roofed dwellings, sunk three steps below the level of the pavement, with over-hanging upper stories, low-browed doorways, and windows that not long ago were latticed: once, no doubt, fair country cottages, where the lavender bushes flowered amid green pastures, stretching away to the sparkling river's brink.

No one goes to look at them, no one sketches them, no one asks how they came there. There they lie, as forgotten as a dropped pin in the crack of a pavement.

Even Mr. Paramount can tell nothing about them. He pays his rent, not an exorbitant one, to a firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn; but whether they represent an owner ignorant of the value of his property, or a City company too wealthy to concern itself about it, he has never found out.

A long slant of sunshine struggled into the little court, and illumined the very house Mr. Stannard was in search of. A great heavy door, studded with iron nails, stood wide open on to a flagged passage, dividing the width of the house. He entered and knocked at the first door on the right at a venture. He fancied he heard a reply, and opened it. The little interior that met his view remained for many days on his mind as singular and pretty, and possessing, he did not know how, some special interest for him.

It was a small parlour, low and dark. Heavy beams supported the ceiling, and the thickness of the wall made a deep window-seat, in the corner of which, full in the one narrow beam of sunshine that entered, crouched a slight girlish figure.

He recognised the lame daughter that was always at his churchwarden's side on Sundays—a spare little creature, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, in a childish cotton frock, with ruffled curly hair, through which the light shone. Some common scarlet runners, trained outside the window, made a bright background for her delicately pretty face, out of which two great luminous eyes gazed in terror at his entrance. He hastened to prevent her from rising; but her hand seemed only just to flutter into his, and be snatched away, and her eyes glanced wildly round in a very panic of shyness, as if seeking some way of escape.

In sheer compassion he gave his message as briefly as he could,

and received her anxious assurances that father would not be home for many an hour to come. Then he would have gone had not the wish seized him to try and inspire a little confidence in this forlorn, frightened-looking child, if child she were. The stray shaft of light was caught and reflected on so many bright points: the shining oil-cloth on the table, the brass knobs of the fire-irons, the glass in the corner cupboard, and the little glinting rows of brass knobs in the horsehair-covered chairs: that it had made the gloom of the rest deeper, and he had not seen at first that another woman was sitting with her back to the window, over the fire in the high black arm-chair, huddled up, with knees and nose almost touching. She now rose, and hobbled off without taking notice of him.

"Who is that?" he ventured to ask.

"A neighbour—Mrs. Beltran—a very kind neighbour," she answered, in a flutter, but speaking more freely: as shy people often do with one hearer only. It was no very difficult task that he had set himself, after all. When the first shock of confronting this formidable stranger—and all strangers were more or less formidable to Elsie Paramount—had worn off, she began to find something curiously pleasant in the grave attention with which her timid little remarks were received, and a disposition growing on her to speak of herself and her interests to an extent that it was alarming to reflect on afterwards. She had actually talked to him about the old times when father was quite well off, before "the firm" failed and ruined him. How the brothers and sisters were scattered, and only herself and Sampson left. Sampson was in an office, doing pretty well *this* time. The Vicar seemed to understand the doubtful inflection, and be sorry for her, and then he talked about himself and St. Fridolin's quite as if he thought her worth talking to—that was a comfort to remember.

She was so frail, so pretty, so delicate, and altogether incongruous—like a daisy in a street pavement, Eustace thought. He turned for a last look as he left the house, and caught a shy glance from behind her scarlet flowers. The great, heavy wooden shutter of the room overhead had half swung to, and, had he looked up there, he might have caught the searching gaze of another pair of eyes fixed on him with no good meaning, from the depths of the dark crevice.

Elsie was smiling to herself in a pleasant, vague musing, when the door opened softly and the "neighbour" re-entered.

The little black shawl that had been huddled over her head and shoulders now hung on her arm, her step was light and springy, and her bent form erect, supple, full of lithe grace and strength. She looked at Elsie with a direct, expressionless gaze, her eyelids gradually closing till they left mere slits through which her eyes seemed to gleam with intensified brilliance. Her lips curved with a suggestion of mockery, and waited patiently for Elsie to speak first.

The Beltrams, Elsie's fellow-lodgers, were exceptions to every rule of life in Lavender Row. They had lived there for nearly a year

now, and came and went, and eat, and slept, with utter disregard of ordinary habits and precedents.

Sometimes Mr. Beltran would disappear for weeks and months at a time, and then spend day after day at home in bed. Elsie could hear him stumbling upstairs lightly in the early grey mornings, and would hear sounds suggestive of getting up in the course of the afternoon; and, later on, had once or twice encountered in the hall a smiling, dark complexioned man, wearing very new glossy clothes, and a great deal of jewellery, who left a strong whiff of combined tobacco and millefleurs on the air as he passed by.

Mrs. Beltran's comings and goings were as erratic as her husband's; but, as they seemed on excellent terms, paid their rent punctually, and kept no children, pet animals, or other element of discord about the premises, their fellow-lodgers ceased to concern themselves about them. They were "foreigners," and that accounted for everything.

A nod and a smile as she passed Elsie at work in her window, then a word at the open door, and so it grew to be a habit for Mrs. Beltran to drop in casually, but only when Elsie was all alone. There was an odd sense of latent power about her perfectly fascinating to the girl. Then she would listen with profoundest interest to the smallest of girlish gossip, and tell in return of strange countries and adventures. Indeed, it is to be feared that sundry flashes of reckless talk, and a dare-devil laugh, with which her narrations were occasionally spiced, had a wicked attraction in themselves for the naughty little romantic child.

Elsie, roused from her dream, looked at her half impatiently at first, then seemed to awake more fully, with a start. "Was it him you meant?" she asked, in an awed whisper.

"The Dark King," assented Mrs. Beltran.

A large work-basket stood on the table. Lifting it carefully off, Mrs. Beltran proceeded to roll off the oilcloth cover, disclosing the white wood top, on which were arranged a number of small playing-cards, arranged in a peculiar pattern.

It would be useless to describe it in detail, except so far as that it consisted of the cards of one pack, starting from the Queen of Hearts, arranged in a pattern of diagonal lines of varying length: the spaces between which were to be filled from the cards of other packs on some principle known only to the initiated.

The scheme had been interrupted during the placing of the cards of the second pack, which had started from the King of Spades. Mrs. Beltran went on dealing and placing with a swiftness and dexterity that were in themselves noteworthy, talking all the time with soft, mechanical volubility for Elsie's benefit, and yet with her mind evidently set on the working out of some problem for her own private satisfaction. "The Dark King, yes, there, just as I told you; he crosses your life, my child. No, I have misplaced a card. Your lives do not *cross*, they *meet*. For good, did you ask? But yes, cer-

tainly. Not for love though. Do not set your thoughts on him, my little one."

"Mrs. Beltran! how could I do such a thing?" gasped Elsie, scandalised. "He is the Vicar, and the son of a lord."

"Eh?" Mrs. Beltran raised her eyebrows and looked attentive. "You must tell me all about him by-and-by. He is so good, you say. And his sermons so beautiful. When will you take me to hear one?"

It was Elsie's turn to look surprised. Delightful as Mrs. Beltran's companionship had been, it had never suggested church-going somehow. "I so seldom hear him," she lamented. "Only on Sundays. I can't go alone, and father disapproves of week-day services."

Mrs. Beltran nodded again. The second pack was exhausted, and the cards disposed in order. "You say he preaches this evening. Your father will not be at home, nor, consequently, your brother, eh?" Her white teeth gleamed maliciously, and she gave a knowing nod as she spoke, while Elsie sighed. "We will go then. It will prevent you fretting after them both. I have nothing more to tell you about him. You will owe him some trouble and some good fortune eventually, that is all."

"And the next?" asked Elsie, curiously. "The Fair Woman?"

Mrs. Beltran drew out a third pack from the pocket of her apron, which seemed as plentifully supplied as the sleeve of the Heathen Chinee. They were not the usual-sized card, but fully a third smaller, and printed on board as light as that used for visiting-cards, with plain, white, glazed backs.

Mrs. Beltran gave the pack to Elsie to cut three times, then dealt the cards in a heap face upwards till a Diamond Queen appeared, when she proceeded to fit the remaining cards into her pattern, still continuing her careless talk, so at variance with the intense scrutiny of her black eyes. "Here she is, you see, following the Dark King. And here she crosses your path—once—twice. Distrust that fair woman, even while accepting her benefits. She will turn against you at last—not till the coming of the Fair King, though. Aha! Now cut this pack. Here he is. You are getting interested in him, are you? Little prude! I dare not hint at his good fortune. A lover for you, my Elsie. Young, handsome, and rich! Take care of him and keep him to yourself when you get him, my little Queen of Hearts."

"Oh! don't!" pleaded the girl, putting up her hand to screen her hot cheeks, with a ring of such pain in her voice that Mrs. Beltran stopped astonished. "A lover? No. Tell that to anyone else—not to me!"

The poor, wasted little hands seemed in one eloquent gesture at once to call attention to, and plead for pity for, her crippled state, while her indignant eyes and flaming cheeks protested against such mockery.

Even Mrs. Beltran was touched, or had the heart to seem so.

"Who said you were always to be ill and miserable, and apart from other girls? Didn't I tell you great things were coming for you?" And she began to pass her forefinger anew over the cards she had first laid down. "Wait for the first Black Seven——"

"Tell me *that!*" cried the girl. "That was to be your card. Don't talk to me about fair or dark kings. Tell me at once what *you* are going to do for me."

Mrs. Beltran waited until she had placed the last card of the pack which she had commenced with the King of Hearts, carefully reading it to herself; though, in compliance with Elsie's request, she communicated no more of the results to her.

She took out from her pocket the last pack, handed it to Elsie to cut as before, and commenced to deal, facing the cards. "Watch for the Seven of Spades," she said, as the cards dropped swiftly from her fingers. The heap on the table grew, and the pack she held diminished one by one, till within a few of the end. She looked surprised, and her brows bent in perplexity.

"I must be going to have very little to do with you after all," and the last card dropped from her fingers as she spoke. "Can we both have missed it? That is unlucky, very unlucky," she said seriously, and taking up the pack, shuffled it, and gave it to Elsie to cut afresh.

Again she dealt the cards slowly and carefully to the end. Long before reaching it her practised fingers had told her a card was missing. The Seven of Spades had disappeared from the pack.

She shook her apron, and turned out the pocket. Each pack had been held by a little band of coloured ribbon, so that it would have seemed impossible for a card to have escaped. Nevertheless, she looked carefully on the floor about, and at last went on her knees to search under the table.

"Has it slipped into the kilting of your skirt?" Elsie asked. "I fancied I saw——"

"I remember!" interrupted Mrs. Beltran, emerging from under the table. "I know now! I was looking over them upstairs one night alone and dropped them all on the floor. It has slipped away through the cracks of the boards there. I nearly lost a letter so one day. But that it should have been that card!" And she growled a comment in Creole French between her teeth that, fortunately for Elsie's sense of propriety, was unintelligible to her. She stood for an instant almost white with anger, wrenching the pack between her hands in a vain effort to tear it.

"Don't! What a pity!" cried Elsie, as she, with another fierce word, thrust them between the bars of the grate; "the card might have been found again."

"The card might have been found, but the chance was lost. They can never again be the first cards touched by your fingers. And they

were running so clearly, too. Ah!" with a sort of impatient snarl and a stamp. "Let them go!"

When she turned again to Elsie, she had composed her features into a resolute smile. "Don't speak to me of them again, but tell me at what time I shall come to take you with me to church this evening."

CHAPTER VIII.

TOLD IN THE VESTRY. (RETROSPECTIVE.)

WHEN Elsie and her companion reached St. Fridolin's that evening they found the church already well filled, for Mr. Stannard's Thursday lectures had become well-known as something worth hearing. There were as many of his own parishioners as he could reasonably expect to see, and several strangers.

One carriage that Elsie had noticed on the previous Sunday was driving away, and the verger was ushering into the foremost pew its occupant, a tall, dignified lady, closely veiled; while she and Mrs. Beltran found their seats in a quiet corner of the side aisle, near another friend from Lavender Row. Eustace found an excitement, or more justly, an inspiration, in addressing the motley assemblage here that had been lacking in ordinary Sunday preaching to his brilliant congregation at St. Ermentrude's. "Those who are here to-night," he thought, "have come not for my sake, but for the sake of what I can give them," and he gave of his best from the fulness of his heart and soul. He was carried beyond himself by the vastness of his subject, so that he heard not when poor Elsie, excited, alarmed, and conscious of being a very naughty girl in being there at all, burst into an unmanageable fit of hysterical sobbing, and was led away by Mrs. Beltran and her friend Mrs. Ridge. Nor did he note the gratifying fact that having seen Elsie part of the way home, Mrs. Beltran returned and unobtrusively regained her place.

The tall lady in front had started at Elsie's cry, glanced round, and then sunk on her knees, hiding her face in her hands. She remained in this attitude, hidden from general view by the high backed pew, till the dispersion of the congregation. Almost all had gone before she slowly rose and made her way down the aisle, the old verger waiting obsequiously at the door in readiness to call up her carriage.

Slowly and more slowly she stepped, till in the very doorway she stopped. "I must! I must!" the verger thought he heard, her say to herself, and she sank on the last of the open seats in the centre of the aisle. "Send Mr. Stannard here, if you please," she said to the old man in a quick, imperative tone. "Has he gone yet?"

"Nay, madam, no farther than the vestry, I dare say." And he trotted off, turning out unnecessary gas-lights on his way, till only one flickering standard remained.

Before Eustace could reach her she came forward to meet him, quickly yet falteringly, and laid her hands on his arm, peering up into his face. "I have something to say to you. Not here, though. Take me somewhere where I can speak to you in safety."

"Let me take you to the vestry. There is no one here but ourselves."

She hesitated, looking fearfully round the dark interior, which was still as a grave, but for a momentary gentle stir that might have been the flutter of a bird's wings aloft, or even the rustle of her own silken skirts.

"I am afraid!" she whispered. "Afraid to speak; afraid of dying without having spoken. I can trust you. You are strong, and brave, and honest. If there is a man in the world who can help me it is you."

"Let me try, at any rate. Your secret shall be as if it had never been told. You are sure of that?"

She bowed her head and he supported her up the dark side aisle to the vestry, from the half-open door of which a stream of light shot forth.

The vestry was a curiously shaped room, a sort of three-cornered excrescence on the main building, cramped and crowded by a great cupboard reaching to the ceiling, where the choir surplices hung, with massive doors that were always swinging open, and a lock that worked by fits and starts. There were quaint old chests too, full of church records, a table many sizes too large, and two chairs. Even the bright lamp that burned there only half lighted the place, and left great nooks and angles of shadow.

The Vicar gave a final and effectual slam to the swinging door, and placed his chair against it, offering the other to his visitor; but she stood in the doorway peering out into the darkness.

"Is no one there? Are you sure no one can hear us? I thought someone passed us just now."

"Only the verger, old Totterdale; I'll ask him." The Vicar sounded a small hand-bell, and the figure of the old man appeared, dark against the dim grey opening of the porch, and shuffled hurriedly towards them. The Vicar went to meet him and returned.

"He has been all over the Church. It is quite empty, and he will lock it up for the night when you go. He is very deaf, and will wait for you in the porch out of hearing."

They re-entered the vestry, and the lady sank into her chair, leaning her arms on the table and resting her face in her hands for a short time. "Do you know me?" she asked, looking up at him suddenly.

There was a soft, plaintive inflection in her speech that reminded him of de Cressy somehow, but her face was strange to him. It was the face of a woman long past her youth, but still wonderfully handsome. Soft masses of wavy white hair were piled high above a white forehead in sharp contrast with her dark, weary, restless eyes.

Her delicate aquiline features had the somewhat over-refined, fastidious expression that high-arched, fine eyebrows and raised nostrils give to the face they belong to. She was a woman to whom diamonds, trailing silken robes, and the uppermost rooms at feasts ought to come by right of birth Eustace thought, as he looked at her with quiet attention, waiting for her to speak again.

"No, you do not know me. I am glad of it. If you did, how could you believe what I am going to tell you? That I—I, of all women——"

She stopped, her breath came quickly and heavily, the rings on her ungloved hands grated as she clasped them together. The next minute she was kneeling at his feet, her head thrown back, and her hands raised to him imploringly.

"Oh, help me! save me! I am a miserable, guilty woman. You preached of repentance and hope—you spoke of confession and forgiveness. Tell me what pardon there is for me? What place of repentance can I find while my sin stays by me?"

"None," spoke Eustace, solemnly and sadly. "But be thankful that there *is* no sin from whose burden deliverance is impossible."

"You shall tell me what to do," she moaned. "I shall go mad or die, with my secret untold, if you will not hear me. You shall tell me what reparation I can make. Surely the time is not past?"

She rose to her feet, and stood veiling herself in the folds of the costly lace that draped her head and shoulders, and shrinking away from him while she spoke.

"How can you guess the crime that clings to me? I brought my husband to his death and renounced my child. Can years of prayer, or seas of penitential tears, blot out that?"

"Tell me the whole story," said Eustace, gravely and authoritatively. "You have no choice now."

"It was so long ago, and I was so young—so young and so ignorant. A poor little neglected child, running wild about our Irish home, with nobody to care for me but blind Aunt Kitty; no companions but my foster sister, Katty Magrath, and her little brothers and sisters. My father never came near the place. No one did. We had enough to eat and drink, but I wore clothes like Katty's, except when I put on my mother's old jewellery. Once, I remember, Aunt de Cressy sent me some finery: a green satin pelisse, like her own daughter's, and a bonnet with feathers, white and green. I remember my reflection in the brook as I ran about in them for months and months barefoot."

She sank into her chair when she began to speak, and now sat half smiling for a second at the remembrance.

"De Cressy!" interrupted the Vicar. "Are you any relation?"

"I am Lionel's cousin. He is your curate, is he not? Yes, I——" She stopped short, her eyes fixed in sudden alarm on Eustace's. "Listen!"

Her lips seemed to breathe inaudibly. Both sat with attention strained to the uttermost. There was no sound in all the great echoing vault of the church, nor in the narrow bounds of the vestry, and yet by some certain momentary arousing of that sixth sense to which no man has given a name, which is not hearing, seeing, or feeling, but a sort of combination of all three, each had felt in that instant's pause that they were not alone. He rose, carried the lamp to the door, and threw its light around once or twice.

"The echo from some noise outside, I suppose," he said, returning and closing the door after him.

She had risen too, and looked fearfully around the small space about her. "What does it matter," she said, at last, "who hears my name? I am Lady Valeria Meynell, and my husband was Oliver Meynell—the great, wise, wealthy, and philanthropic Oliver Meynell. Ah! you have heard of him, and of me—of all my good deeds, and of the children I have brought up to follow in his footsteps." And she laughed a little cynical laugh. "He was a good man too. He reclaimed me, and made me what I am. I was afraid of him, you see, and dare not be anything but what he bade me. We were happy together; but it is not less the truth than when I married him I had another husband and a living child."

She seemed to force the words from her lips as it were loudly, and with a sort of bravado; then her voice fell, and her face grew white and scared as she went on rapidly.

"Jack never was my husband, they would have told you; and they took my little child from me at its birth, and swore to me it was dead; but I knew better."

She paused a moment. Eustace was silent and attentive.

"I never knew what brought Jack to Glenara—my home," she continued. "He was the first gentleman I had ever seen, except my father, and I thought him a prince, and ran after him like a little dog. He was spending a month's leave in the mountains, sketching and fishing, and I used to go off with him, roaming the glens the summer days long, without word or thought of harm. When the time came for him to go, I just kissed Aunt Kitty, and ran over the hill to the Magraths, where a strange priest married us, and off we went to Dublin together. *He* to mean me harm—my Jack! Never! It was fine fun at first, going about and seeing sights with him, dressed in all the beautiful gowns he bought me; but it didn't last. Jack was handsome and rich, and would be a baronet some day, and there were plenty to tell him how he had thrown himself away in marrying me. Then I hated the grand ladies he knew, who would laugh at me even while they spoke so sweetly to "*La Belle Sauvage*," as I heard one call me. And, in truth, no better than a savage was I when I heard her. Jack joked me about it when I told him. I think he had been drinking, or he never would have spoken as he did. I caught up a knife to give him his answer, but he twisted it out of my hand, and

threw it out of the window, and locked me in the room 'till my tantrums were over.' I saw him go past the window, and I knew he was going to her."

"Poor child!" sighed the Vicar, seeing before him not the stately, remorse-stricken woman, but the beautiful, wild, passionate, forlorn child of the story.

"I called to him. I beat my hands sore on the door. Someone came at last and let me out, and just as I was I would have rushed bare-headed through the streets in search of him, but that the person, whoever it was, held my hands and stopped me. Then I saw it was my father.

"Never mind what he said to me. I grow sick with rage and shame to this day when I think of it. He took me away that hour and put me in the convent of the Sacred Heart, where my Aunt was abbess; and then—went back to Dublin and shot Jack dead in the Phoenix Park at sunrise next morning."

"Dead!" the Vicar ejaculated, with a long-drawn breath of relief, despite his sympathy. She turned sharply on him.

"Was he?" she queried, a world of meaning in her dark, doubtful gaze. "I think they lied to me. I think he let them leave him for dead to be rid of me. I think—I know"—she glanced over her shoulder suspiciously as she spoke and drew nearer the Vicar. "*I saw his name in despatches* long after. He *was* alive, and my saintly husband knew it, but would not give me up to him. Liars all!" she cried, with fierce sudden passion, "and amongst them all I am Lost—Lost—Lost!"

There was silence while Eustace stood gravely pondering on this new and serious feature of the case, and Lady Valeria sat with quivering lips and knit brow, afraid to trust her voice again. The flame of anger died out as rapidly as it had flamed up, however, and she went on in weary sullenness.

"Do you want to hear about the convent: how they kept me there eating my heart out for months waiting for news that never came: and then sent me away—dreading scandal you understand? My boy was born at Biddy Magrath's—I mean Katty's mother and my foster-mother, and died—so they told me. I was too ill to know. My father was like a madman at the thoughts of his own folly, for Jack was in his grave—or they all thought so then, for certain, and the wrong he had done me could never be righted. I must go back to the convent again; it was the only place for me now. I was too ill and wretched to care what became of me, and let them do as they pleased."

"You went back to the convent as a postulant?" he inquired.

She nodded.

"They would have it so; but when I got well and strong, and felt the hatefulness of it all, I ran away, about a year after. It was the best way. They never would have let me go. I was out marketing

with Sister Clare one day, when we met a nice little man, like a clergyman, who walked alongside of us, reading bits of the Bible out loud, and preaching a little now and then. Sister Clare crossed herself, and bid me never listen to a word. He was, she said, the agent of the Irish Church Missionary Society, a most pestilential evil-doer. She was an awful old gossip, and instead of shutting her eyes and hurrying home, she just dawdled about watching him gather the people around him at the street corner and give away tracts. I watched him too, and settled how he should help me. Next day, when we went out, I had a note ready written in my sleeve. Old Sister Catherine was with me, and she was just as keen to see what was going on as Sister Clare. At the first turning we came face to face with the man, followed by half the rabble of the place, and in a minute he had dropped a tract into Sister Catherine's basket, and put another in my hand, and as he did so I squeezed the note into his. I knew he wouldn't fail me. I slipped down the garden that night, scrambled over a broken-down corner of the wall, found my friend in waiting with a bonnet and shawl, as I had bid him, left my veil in the nearest hedge, and long before anyone missed me was safe in the train on my way to Glenara."

"Why did you go there?"

"To find my boy—my own living baby-boy. All those long, lonely nights in my cell I had heard him wailing for me. I had felt his little fingers in the dark, clutching at my neck. I knew he was living, and I went to seek for him. The little missionary talked to me all the way, and I agreed to everything he said. It made him very happy, and he put the whole story of my escape and conversion into his next report. I hope it did him some good with his employers. He knew Aunt de Cressy well. She was at Glenara, and he thought I was going to her; but when we parted I made my way at once to Biddy Magrath's. The little cabin was roofless and empty, and while I stood wondering and terrified, a neighbour came past driving a cow. 'Save us! an' is it Biddy you're seekin'? Sure, she and Stephen and the childther are all gone this six months since.' 'The children?' I asked. 'How many?' 'Four of them: no less. Katty, an' Norah an' the weeshy baby, Stephen; an' it's safe in America they'll be by this time.' I had lost him again. I thanked the girl, and, with my heart breaking, turned back to Glenara—and then Aunt de Cressy carried me off to England."

"But your vows?" asked the Vicar, slightly scandalised. She shrugged her shoulders with bitter contempt.

"They never troubled me. My father found me out, but when Aunt de Cressy told him the rich young banker, Oliver Meynell, was in love with me, not a word would he hear of the Sacred Heart again either. I did try to hold out. I told Oliver the whole truth; every word. I did not want to marry him. Never."

"It was a grievous wrong——" the Vicar began.

"I tell you I could not help it," she retorted passionately. "I could stand out against my father; I could persuade Aunt de Cressy; but when Oliver came near me I was dumb, powerless. His cold blue eyes used to light up when they looked at me; his hand used to hold mine with a grip of steel. I used to plead and protest, but his look would kill the words on my lips. I used to turn away from him, but I felt him drawing me nearer and nearer, resist as I would."

"But did no thought of your husband—of your baby-boy come between you and him?"

"I *could* not think of them when he was there. My mind seemed a blank, which he could fill as he pleased. He used to talk to me about the errors of Rome, and the noble sphere of power and usefulness that lay before me. I tell you I cared not one whit for him or his views, or my life; sometimes I hated him—always I feared him—but I married him. Sinful, dishonoured wretch that I was!"

"Is 'Jack,' your first husband, alive now?" Eustace constrained himself to ask. "You must give me no half confidence."

"I never cared to know. He may be. He is 'Sir John,' I suppose; married to some other woman, perhaps. *He* left me willingly, but my boy was stolen from me. It is for *him* I am sorrowing and repenting."

"You believe he is still living?"

"Believe? I *know* it. I have been hoping and seeking ever since Oliver died, and at last, by a chance—I cannot tell you how—I got news that he still lives. Lives! and away from me!"

"And you want me to bring him to you; or, to find him, and bring you news of him?"

Her face lighted with rapture, but his upraised hand stayed her reply.

"I will undertake nothing unless I possess your full confidence. You have gained news of him by chance—in some manner you do not care to make known. Tell me what it amounted to."

"The Magraths took my boy for their own. Their little Stephen died in the fever, so mine took his place. Afterwards in America, when other children were born to them, they were ready enough to part with him to a rich English lady, who has adopted him and brought him up as a gentleman—the poor boy!"

The Vicar listened frowningly.

"Do you know where the Magraths are to be found?"

She shook her head. "I have poured out money like water to find them, here and in America, and I have failed."

"Do you know the name of the rich English lady—your son's present name, of course?"

She shook her head again. "I never heard it."

"Why do you call him 'Jack' when he must have been known as 'Stephen?' he asked, suddenly raising his keen piercing eyes to hers.

She frowned uneasily. "I always thought of him by that name,

somehow. *I couldn't* think of him as anything else. I am sure that *is* his name now."

"And he is—how old? Between thirty and forty, or older?" making a random guess at her age—possibly sixty.

She knitted her delicate brows once more, and pressed her thin hands over her eyes.

"I—I can't think he is that. He must be young—quite young. Tall and fair like his father, with kind, bright eyes—blue eyes. I should know them anywhere, and Jack's own smile."

Mr. Stannard frowned. Was this delusion, or wilful mystification? He put the question aside for the present.

"You must let me think this over before I can advise you. You may be much drawn to your son—your first-born—that I can well believe,"—she gave a low, yearning cry and stretched her hands out by way of response—"but are you doing him a kindness in revealing the sad secret of his birth? Will he love you, or owe you any thanks for proving him base born?"

"Base born!" she almost shrieked, starting to her feet again. "Never! Could I have lived till now if I had believed that? It was my father's hatred of Jack made him say the word. Jack never would have wronged me. Never! The marriage was a good one. He swore it when he thought he was dying, though he couldn't rightly prove it. No; he may have lived to hate and forsake me, but he never dared to do me any dishonour, and, now that Oliver is dead, I'll move Heaven and earth that justice shall be done to my boy!"

"Stop!" almost shouted the Vicar, startled out of all his composure. "You must not. You shall not. Not till I have set before you what you are going to do. You are going to blacken the memories of your dead husband and father; to bring crushing disgrace on your other children; and to proclaim yourself—what? Ask your son if he would not rather die believing himself peasant born but honest—than own for a mother the vile creature that you would make yourself out to be? It is the act of a mad woman. You come to me for help and counsel. I counsel, I command silence. Now and hereafter, silence. For the sake of your living children, for the sake of your dead husband and father, in the name of your unknown son, I enjoin it. This is the burden laid on you to bear to the end. Cast it from you if you dare."

He stopped abruptly, startled at his own vehemence and the effect of his words. Lady Valeria had shrunk away under his first indignant outburst, and cowered down in her chair beneath his out-stretched hand, all scared and white. Then she began to tremble violently as in an ague fit; long drawn shuddering sighs escaped her, sighs that became sobs and ended in a passionate weeping. The Vicar was used to weeping women, to the vociferous, unrestrained lamentations of the lower orders, but he was struck with the oddly childish character

of her grief. It was more like the clearing up shower of tears after a fit of naughtiness, than the scalding drops of shame and contrition, or even the sobs of hysterical excitement. He waited for a little and then spoke a few encouraging words softly and at intervals till the fit was over. She looked up presently, mechanically arranging her disordered head-dress and draping her shawl around her, listening with a quiet, subdued air.

"Promise me," he ended, "that you will drive away the thought of self-betrayal from your mind. You can do nothing but harm. Your son has been given into good hands, you say, and has no need of you. The pain of the separation has fallen as it should, on the one who has sinned. What can you do for him but bring sorrow and shame?"

"I can make him rich," she said eagerly. "You do not know how wealthy I am. He shall have Glenara and all the money Mr. Meynell settled on me to keep it up. That was the bribe that tempted my poor father, money enough to free the estate—which is to go to my eldest son. Do you think I could bear to think of Oliver there?"

Eustace groaned in spirit at the task which lay before him. Here was an embarrassing family secret given into his keeping. Lady Valeria's mind was evidently failing her beneath the burden of it. Or did her sudden frantic craving for spiritual aid simply mean a desperate effort to secure an accomplice in some wild scheme of restitution in secret? He must have time to think it out before committing himself farther.

"I will give you help to the utmost of my power," he said deliberately; "and will keep your confidence sacred; but I must beg of you some further help. I want the date of your marriage and your son's birth. I want the year when you had the last news of him. I want his real name—his father's name."

"No!" she almost screamed, then controlled herself by a strong effort. She kept her eyes fixed on his, while a sort of dumb struggle seemed to shake her frame with agony. "I can't," she gasped at length. "I will not. When they told me that dreadful day that I had no right to it, then I vowed that it should never pass my lips again till my dying day. I should go mad if I were to see or hear it now."

She sat panting and trembling, her eyes glittering wildly in the lamplight, now and then sending sharp sideway glances at Eustace.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"I will write to you and fix a time," she said, rising. "I will go now. Good-bye."

Eustace opened the door and looked out.

"Wait until I have seen whether your carriage is there," he said, and hastened to the porch, where he found the old verger on his favourite three-legged stool, half asleep, but resolutely maintaining his right to see everybody out of the church, and the church locked up to his satisfaction before he departed.

Lady Valeria clung to Eustace's arm suddenly as they went down the aisle. "We are followed!" she whispered. "There it is again! No, you needn't look; it is by no earthly tread. I know it well. Hush! It is by the spirit of the man I have wronged—of Oliver, my husband. It will follow me to my grave."

She hurried out into the clear night air and cold autumn moonlight. "Good-bye," she said again, and then, bending towards the Vicar, whispered: "I feared him once, but the days are coming when my boy will be by my side, and neither man nor spirit can harm me then." And her dark eyes sparkled through a sudden rain of tears.

He hastened back more disturbed than he cared to own even to himself. He cast one rapid glance round the vestry as he turned down the lamp, and, with the latest flicker, caught sight of a small white oblong at his feet.

He looked again at it before the light flickered out, and the second glimpse was so startling as to make him in all haste rekindle the light and look again.

It was a tiny playing-card. The Seven of Spades.

(*To be continued.*)



THE STORY OF TWO OLD PEOPLE.

From the French of MARC MONNIER.

ONCE he was twenty and she only ten,

She was a child, he scarcely in his prime:

Youth seemed so long and age so distant then,

And noon came not, as now, ere morning time.

But later on, they chanced again to meet;

And he was thirty, and she twenty now:

"Why, he is old," exclaimed the maiden sweet,

And passed, with careless heart and cloudless brow.

Ten years (a weary round) roll on again,

Whose days and weeks, so like each other, pass,

That when they meet 'tis he, with sudden pain,

Who cries, in turn, "Why she is old, alas!"

But often on those tender April eves,

When hearts beat time to hidden melodies,

"Why was I never loved?" he asks—and grieves.

"Why did I never love?" she asks—and sighs.

And now, opprest with vain regret, they say,

As years wear on in ever-deepening gloom:

"Children, enjoy the sunshine while you may,

And pluck the flower in its morning bloom."

ALEX. HAVES.

A TRAGEDY.

THE windows of the room, called the Buttery, which Mr. Preen used as an office in his house at Duck Brook, were thrown open to the warm, pure air. It was about the hottest part of the afternoon. Oliver Preen sat back in his chair before the large table covered with papers, waiting in idleness and inward rebellion—rebellion against the untoward fate which had latterly condemned him to this dreary and monotonous life. Taking out his pocket-handkerchief with a fling, he passed it over his fair, mild face, which was very hot just now.

To day, of all days, Oliver had wanted to be at liberty, whereas he was being kept a prisoner longer than usual, and for nothing. When Mr. Preen rode out after breakfast in the morning he had left Oliver a couple of letters to copy as a beginning, remarking that there was a great deal to do that day, double work, and he should be back to it in half-an-hour. The double work arose from the fact that none had been done the day before, as Mr. Preen was out. For that day, Monday—this was Tuesday—was the day Mr. Preen had paid us a visit at Crabb Cot, to be paid for Taffy, the pony, and had then gone to Norton, and afterwards to Stoulton, and it had taken him the best part of the day. So the double work was waiting. But the half hours and the hours had passed on, and Mr. Preen had not yet returned. It was now three o'clock in the afternoon, and they had dined without him.

Oliver, who did not dare to absent himself without permission, and perhaps was too conscientious to do so, left his chair for the window. The old garden was quite a wilderness of blossom and colour, with all kinds of homely flowers crowded into it. The young man stretched forth his hand and plucked a spray or two of jessamine, which grew against the wall. Idly smelling it he lost himself in a vision of the days gone by; his careless, happy life at Tours, in his aunt's luxurious home, when he had no fear of a dark future, had only to dress well and ride or drive out, and idly enjoy himself.

Suddenly he was brought back to reality. The sound of hoofs, clattering into the fold-yard behind the house, struck upon his ear, and he knew his father had come home.

Ten minutes yet, or more, and then Mr. Preen came into the room, his little dark face looking darker and more cross than usual. He had been snatching some light refreshment. He sat down at once in his place at the table, facing the windows; Oliver sat opposite to him.

"What have you done?" asked he.

"I have only copied those two letters; there was nothing else to do," replied Oliver.

"Could you not have looked over the pile of letters which came this morning, to see whether there were any you could answer?" growled Mr. Preen.

"Why no, father," replied Oliver in slight surprise; "I did not know I might look at them. And if I had looked I should not have known what to reply."

Mr. Preen began reading the letters over at railroad speed, dictating answers for Oliver to write, writing some himself. This took time. He had been unexpectedly detained at the other end of Captain Falkner's land by some business which had vexed him. Most of these letters were from farmers and others, about the new patent agricultural implements for which Mr. Preen had taken the agency. He wished to push the sale of them as it gave him a good percentage.

The answers, addressed and stamped for the post, at length lay ready on the table. Mr. Preen then took out his pocket-book and extracted from it that ten-pound bank-note given him the previous morning by Mr. Todhetley for the children's pony, the note he had got the Squire to indorse, as I have already told. Letting the bank-note lie open before him, Mr. Preen penned a few lines, as follows, Oliver looking on:—

"DEAR SIR,—I enclose you the ten pounds. Have not been able to send it before. Truly yours, G. PREEN."

Mr. Preen folded the sheet on which he had written this, put the bank-note within it, and enclosed all in a good-sized business envelope, which he fastened securely down. He then addressed it to John Paul, Esquire, Islip, and put on a postage stamp.

"I shall seal this, Oliver," he remarked; "it's safer. Get the candle and the wax. Here, you can seal it," he added, taking the signet ring from his finger, on which was engraved the crest of the Preen family.

Oliver lighted a candle kept on a stand at the back for such purposes, brought it to the table, and sealed the letter with a large, imposing red seal. As he passed the ring and letter back to his father, he spoke.

"If you are particularly anxious that the letter should reach Mr. Paul safely, father, and of course you are so, as it contains money, why did you not send it by hand? I would have taken it to him."

"There's nothing safer than the post," returned Mr. Preen, "and I want him to have it to-morrow morning."

Oliver laughed. "I could have taken it this evening, father. I can do so still, if you like."

"No, it shall go by post. You want to be off to Mac Everil, I suppose."

"No I do not," replied Oliver. "Had I been able to finish here this morning I might have gone over this afternoon; it is too late now."

"You had nothing to do all day yesterday," growled his father.

"Oh, yes, I know. I am not grumbling."

Mr. Preen put the letter into his pocket, gathered up the pile of other letters, handed half of them to his son, for it was a pretty good heap, and they started for the post, about three minutes' walk.

The small shop containing the post office at Duck Brook was kept by Mrs. Sym; she sold sweetstuff, also tapes and cottons. Young Sym, her son, a growing youth, delivered the letters, which were brought in by a mail-cart. She was a clean, tidy woman of middle age; who was never seen out of a muslin cap with a wide border and a black bow, a handkerchief crossed over her shoulders, and a checked apron.

Oliver, of lighter step than his father, reached the post-office first and tumbled his portion of the letters into the box placed in the window to receive them. The next moment Mr. Preen put his in also, together with the letter addressed to Mr. Paul.

"We are too late," observed Oliver. "I thought we should be."

"Eh?" exclaimed Mr. Preen, in surprise, as he turned round. "Too late! Why how can the afternoon have gone on!" he continued, his eyes falling on the clock of the little grey church which stood beyond the triangle of houses, the hands of which were pointing to a quarter past five.

"If you knew it was so late why did you not say so?" he asked sharply of his son.

"I was not sure until I saw the clock; I only thought it must be late by the time we had been at work," replied Oliver.

"I might have sent you over with that letter as you suggested, had I known it would not go to-night. I wonder whether Dame Sym would give it back to me."

He dived down the two steps into the shop as he spoke, Oliver following. Dame Sym—so Duck Brook called her—stood knitting behind the little counter, an employment she took up at spare moments.

"Mrs. Sym, I've just put some letters into the box, not perceiving that it was past five o'clock," began Mr. Preen civilly. "I suppose they'll not go to-night?"

"Can't sir," replied the humble post-mistress. "The bag's made up."

"There's one letter that will hardly bear delay. It is for Mr. Paul of Islip. If you can return it me out of the box I will send it over by hand at once; my son will take it."

"But it is not possible, sir. Once a letter is put into the box I dare not give it back again," remonstrated Mrs. Sym, gazing amiably at Mr. Preen through her spectacles, whose round glasses had a trick of glistening when at right angles with the light.

"You might stretch a point for once, to oblige me," returned Mr. Preen, fretfully.

"And I'm sure I'd not need to be pressed to do it, sir, if I could,"

she cried in her hearty way. "But I dare not break the rules, sir; I might lose my place. Our orders are not to open the receiving box until the time for making-up, or give a letter back on any pretence whatever."

Mr. Preen saw that further argument would be useless. She was a kindly, obliging old body, but upright to the last degree in all that related to her place. Anything that she believed (right or wrong) might not be done she stuck to.

"Obstinate as the grave," muttered he.

Dame Sym did not hear; she had turned away to serve a child who came in for a bullseye. Mr. Preen waited.

"When will the letter go?" he asked, as the child went out.

"By to-morrow's day mail, sir. It will be delivered at Islip—I think you said Islip, Mr. Preen—about half-past four, or so, in the afternoon."

"Is the delay of much consequence, sir?" inquired Oliver, as he and his father turned out of the shop.

"No," said Mr. Preen. "Only I hate letters to be delayed uselessly in the post."

Tea was waiting when they got in. A mutton chop was served with it for Mr. Preen, as he had lost his dinner. Jane ran downstairs, drank a cup of tea in haste, and ran back again. She had been busy in her bedroom all day, smartening-up a dress. A picnic was to be held on Thursday, the next day but one; Jane and Oliver were invited to it, and Jane wanted to look as well at it as other girls.

After tea Oliver sat for ever so long at the open window, reading the Worcester Journal. He then strolled out to the Inlets, sauntered beside the brook, and presently threw himself listlessly upon one of the benches facing it. The sun shone right upon his face there, so he tilted his straw hat over his eyes. That did not do, and he moved to another bench which the trees shaded. He often felt lonely and weary now; this evening especially so; even Jane was not with him.

His thoughts turned to Emma Paul; and a glow, bright as the declining sun rays, shot up in his heart. As long as *she* filled it, he could not be all gloom.

"If I had means to justify it I should speak to her," mused he—as he had told himself forty times over, and forty more. "But when a fellow has no fortune, and no prospect of fortune; when it may be seen by no end of odd signs and tokens that he has not so much as a silver coin in his pocket, how can he ask a girl the one great question of life? Old Paul would send me to the right-about."

He leaned his head sideways for a few minutes against the trunk of a tree, gazing at the reddening sky through the green tracery of the waving boughs; and fell to musing again.

"If she loved me as I love her, she would be glad to wait on as things are, hoping for better times. Lovers, who are thus attached

to each other, do wait for years and years, and are all the happier for it. Sometimes I feel inclined to enlist in a crack regiment. The worst of it is that a fellow rarely rises from the ranks in England to position and honour, as he does in France; they manage things better over there. If old Uncle Edward would only open his purse-strings and buy me a commission, I might — Halloo!"

A burst of girlish laughter, and a pair of girlish arms, flung round his neck from behind, disturbed Oliver's castles-in-the-air. Jane came forward and sat down beside him. "I thought I should find you here, Oliver," she said.

"Frock finished, Janey?"

"Finished! why no," she exclaimed. "It will hardly be finished by this time to-morrow."

"Why, how idle you must have been!"

"Idle? You don't understand things, or the time it takes to make an old frock into a new one. A dressmaker might have done it in a day, but I'm not a dressmaker, you know, Mr. Oliver."

"Is it a silk gown?"

"It is a mousseline-de-laine, if you chance to be acquainted with that material," answered Janey. "It was very pretty when it was new: pale pink and lilac blossoms upon a cream ground. But it has been washed, and that has made it shrink, and it has to be let out everywhere and lengthened, and the faded silk trimming has to be turned, and—oh, ever so much work. And now, I daresay you are as wise as you were before, Oliver."

"I've heard of washed-out dresses," remarked Oliver. "They look like rags, don't they?"

"Some may. Mine won't. It has washed like a pocket handkerchief, and it looks as good as new."

"Wish my coats would wash," said Oliver. "They are getting shabby and I want some new ones."

Not having any consolation to administer in regard to the coats, Jane did not take up the subject. "What have you been doing all day, Oliver?" she asked.

"Airing my patience in that blessed Buttery," replied he. "Never stirred out of it at all, except for dinner."

"I thought you wanted to get over to Islip this afternoon."

"I might want to get over to the North Pole, and be none the nearer. Mac Everil was bound for some place a mile or two across fields this afternoon, on business for the office, and I promised to go over to walk with him. Promises, though, are like pie-crust, Janey: made to be broken."

Jane nodded assent. "And a promise which you are obliged to break is sure to be one you particularly want to keep. I wish I had a pair of new gloves, Oliver. Pale grey."

"I wish I had half-a-dozen new pairs, for the matter of that. Just look at those little minnows, leaping in the water. How pretty they are!"

He went to the edge of the brook and stood looking down at the small fry. Jane followed. Then they walked about in the Inlets, then sat down again and watched the sunset; and so the evening wore away until they went home.

Jane was shut up again the following day, busy with her dress; Oliver, as usual, was in the Buttery with his father. At twelve o'clock Mr. Preen prepared to go out to keep an appointment at Evesham, leaving Oliver a lot of work to do, very much to his aggravation.

"It's a shame. It will take me all the afternoon to get through it," ran his thoughts—and he would have liked to say so aloud.

"You don't look pleased, young man," remarked his father. "Recollect you will be off duty to-morrow."

Oliver's countenance cleared; his disposition was a pleasant one, never retaining anger long, and he set to his task with a good will. The morrow being the day of the picnic, he would have whole holiday.

At five o'clock the young servant carried the tea-tray into the parlour. Presently Mrs. Preen came in, made the tea, and sat down to wait for her son and daughter. Tired and hot, she was glad of the rest.

Jane ran down stairs, all happiness. "Mamma, it is finished," she cried; "quite finished. It looks so well."

"It had need look well," fretfully retorted Mrs. Preen, who had been unable to get at Jane for any useful purpose these two days, and resented it accordingly.

"When all trades fail I can turn dressmaker," said the girl, gaily. "Where's Oliver?"

"In the Buttery, I expect; he said he had a great deal to do there this afternoon, and I have not seen him about," replied Mrs. Preen, as she poured out the tea. "Not that I should have been likely to see him—shut into that hot kitchen with the ironing."

Jane knew this was a shaft meant for herself. At ordinary times she did her share of the ironing. "I will tell Oliver that tea is ready, mamma," she said, rising to go to the other room. "Why there he is, sitting in the shade under the walnut tree," she exclaimed, happening to look from the window.

"Sitting out in the cool," remarked Mrs. Preen. "I don't blame him, poring all day long over those accounts and things. Call him in, Jane."

"Coming," said Oliver, in response to Jane's call from the open window.

He crossed the grass slowly, fanning himself with his straw hat. His fair face—an unusual thing with him—was scarlet.

"You look red-hot, Oliver," laughed his sister.

"If it is as hot to-morrow as it is to-day we shall get a baking," returned Oliver.

"In this intense weather nothing makes one feel the heat like work, and I suppose you've been hard at it this afternoon," said his mother

in a tone of compassion, for she disliked work naturally very much herself.

"Of course ; I had to be," answered Oliver.

He and Jane sat together under the shade of the walnut tree after tea. When it grew a little cooler they went to the Inlets, that favourite resort of theirs ; a spot destined to bear a strange significance for one of them in the days to come ; a haunting remembrance.

II.

The white mist, giving promise of a hot and glorious day, had hardly cleared itself from the earth, when, at ten o'clock on the Thursday morning, Jane and Oliver Preen set off in the gig for North Villa, both of them as spruce as you please ; Jane in that pretty summer dress she had spent so much work over, a straw hat with its wreath of pink may shading her fair face, Oliver with a white rose in his button-hole. The party was first to assemble at Mrs. Jacob Chandler's, and to go from thence in waggonettes. There had been some trouble about the gig, Mr. Preen wanting it himself that day, or telling Jane and Oliver that he did, and that they could walk. Jane almost cried, declaring she did not care to arrive at North Villa looking like a milkmaid, hot and red with walking ; and Mr. Preen gave way. Oliver was to drive himself and Jane, Sam being sent on to Crabb to bring back the gig.

Mr. Preen did not regard the picnic with favour. Mr. Preen could not imagine what anybody could want at one, he said, when ungraciously giving consent to Oliver's absenting himself from that delightful Buttery for a whole day.

Picnics in truth are nearly all alike, and are no doubt more agreeable to the young than to the old. This one was given conjointly by the Jacob Chandlers, the Letsoms, the Coneys, and the Ashtons of Timberdale. A few honorary guests were invited. I call them honorary because they had nothing to do with finding provisions. Tod got an invitation, myself also ; and uncommonly vexed we were not to be able to arrive till late in the afternoon. The Beeles from Pigeon Green were coming to spend the day at Crabb Cot, and the Squire would not let us off earlier.

The picnic was held upon Mrs. Cramp's farm, not far from Crabb, and a charming spot for it. Gentle hills and dales, shady groves and mossy glens surrounded the house, which was a very good one. So that it may be said we all were chiefly Mrs. Cramp's guests. Mrs. Cramp made a beaming hostess, and was commander-in-chief at her own tea-table. Tea was taken in her large parlour, to save the bother of carrying things out. Dinner had been taken in the dell, under shade of the high and wide-spreading trees.

They were seated at tea when we got there. Such a large company

at the long table ; and such tempting things to eat ! I found a seat by Emma Paul, the prettiest girl there ; Oliver Preen was next her on the other side. Mary MacEveril made room for Tod beside her. The MacEverils were proud, exclusive people, and Miss MacEveril privately looked down on some of her fellow guests ; but Tod was welcome, he was of her own order.

Two or three minutes later Tom Chandler came in ; he also had not been able to get away earlier. He shook hands with his aunt, Mrs. Cramp, nodded to the rest of us, and 'eftly managed to wedge himself in between Emma Paul and young Preen. Preen did not seem pleased, Emma did ; and made all the room she could, by crushing me.

"I wouldn't be in your shoes to-morrow morning, young man," began Mr. Chandler, in a serio-comic tone, as he looked at Dick MacEveril across the table. "To leave the office to its own devices the first thing this morning, in defiance of orders ——"

"Hang the musty old office !" interrupted MacEveril, with a genial laugh.

Valentine Chandler had done the same by his office ; pleasure first and business later always with both of them ; but Valentine was his own master and MacEveril was not. In point of fact, Mr. Paul, not a man to be set at defiance by his clerks, was in a great rage with Dick MacEveril.

I supposed the attractions of the picnic had been too powerful for Dick, and that he thought the sooner he got to it the better. But this proved to be a fallacy. Mrs. Cramp was setting her nephew right.

"My dear Tom, you are mistaken. Mr. MacEveril did not come this morning ; he only got here an hour ago—like two or three more of the young men."

"Oh, did he not, Aunt Mary Ann ?" replied Tom, turning his handsome, pleasant face upon her.

"Yes, and if you were not at the office I should like to know what you did with yourself all day, Dick," severely cried Miss MacEveril, bending forward to regard her cousin.

"I went to see the pigeon-match," said Dick, coolly.

"To see the pigeon-match !" she echoed. "How cruel of you ! You had better not let papa know."

"If anyone lets him know it will be yourself, Miss Mary. And suppose you hold your tongue now," cried Dick, not very politely.

This little passage-at-arms over, we went on with tea. Afterwards we strolled out of doors and disposed of ourselves at will. Some of the Chandler girls took possession of me, and I went about with them.

When it was getting late, and they had talked me deaf, I began looking about for Tod, and found him on a bench, within the Grove. A sheltered spot. Sitting there, you could look out, but people

could not look in. Mary MacEveril and Georgiana Chandler were with him; Oliver Preen stood close by, leaning against the stump of a tree. I thought how sad his look was, and wondered what made it so.

Within view of us, but not within hearing, in a dark, narrow walk Tom Chandler and Emma Paul were pacing side by side, absorbed evidently in one another. The sun had set, the lovely colours in the sky were giving place to twilight. It was the hour when matter-of-fact prosaic influences change into romance; when, if there's any sentiment within us it is safe to come out.

"It is the hour when from the boughs
The nightingale's high note is heard;
It is the hour when lovers' vows
Seem sweet in every whispered word,"

as Lord Byron says. And who could discourse on love—the true ring of it, mind—as he did?

"Do sing," said Tod to Miss MacEveril; and I found they had been teasing her to do so for the last five minutes. She had a pleasant voice and sang well.

"I'm sure you don't care to hear me, Mr. Todhetley."

"But I'm sure I do," answered Tod, who would flirt with pretty girls when the fit took him. Flirt and flatter too.

"We should have everyone coming round us."

"Not a soul of them. They are all away somewhere, out of hearing. Do sing me one song."

She began at once, without more ado, choosing an old song that Mrs. Todhetley often chose; one that was a favourite of hers, as it was of mine: "Faithless Emma." Those songs of the old days bore, all of them, a history.

"I wandered once at break of day,
While yet upon the sunless sea
In wanton sighs the breeze delayed,
And o'er the wavy surface played.
Then first the fairest face I knew,
First loved the eye of softest blue,
And ventured, fearful, first to sip
The sweets that hung upon the lip
Of faithless Emma.

So mixed the rose and lily white
That nature seemed uncertain, quite,
To deck her cheek which flower she chose,
The lily or the blushing rose.
I wish I ne'er had seen her eye,
Ne'er seen her cheeks of doubtful dye,
Nor ever, ever dared to sip
The sweets that hung upon the lip
Of faithless Emma.

Now though from early dawn of day,
I rove alone and, anxious, stray
Till night with curtain dark descends,
And day no more its glimmerings lends ;
Yet still, like hers no cheek I find,
No eye like hers, save in my mind,
Where still I fancy that I sip
The sweets that hung upon the lip
Of faithless Emma."

"I think all Emmas are faithless," exclaimed Georgiana, speaking at random, as the last sounds of the sweet song died away.

"A sweeping assertion, Miss Georgie," laughed Tod.

"Anyway, I knew two girls named Emma who were faithless to their engaged lovers, and one of them's not married yet to anyone else," returned Georgie.

"I think I know one Emma who will be true for ever and a day," cried Tod, as he pointed significantly to Emma Paul, still walking side by side with Tom Chandler in the distance.

"I could have told you that before now," said Mary MacEveril. "I have seen it for a long time, though Miss Emma will never confess to it."

"And now, I fancy it will soon be a case," continued Tod.

"A case !" cried Georgie. "What do you mean ?"

"A regular case ; dead, and gone, and done for," nodded Tod. "Church bells and wedding gloves, and all the rest of the paraphernalia. Looks like it, anyhow, to-night."

"Oh !" exclaimed Georgie, "then how sly Tom has been over it, never to tell us ! Is it really true ? I shall ask Valentine."

"The last person likely to know," said Tod. "You'll find it's true enough, Georgie."

"Then ——" Georgie began, and broke off. "Listen !" she cried. "They are beginning to dance on the lawn. Come, Mary." And the two girls moved away, attracted by the scraping of the fiddle.

Oliver Preen moved a step forward from the tree, speaking in a low, calm tone ; but his face was white as death.

"Were you alluding to *them* ?" he asked, looking across to those two pacing about. "Why do you say it is a 'case' ?"

"Because I am sure it is one," answered Tod. "They have been in love with one another this many a day past, those two, months and months and years. As everyone might see who had eyes, except old Paul. That's why, Preen."

Oliver did not answer. He had his arm round the trunk of a tree looking across as before.

"And I wouldn't stake a fortune that Paul has not seen it also," went on Tod. "All the same, I had a rumour whispered to me to-day that he sees it now, and has said 'Bless you, my

children. "Tom Chandler is to be made his partner and to marry Emma."

"We are too many girls there, and want you for partners," cried Eliza Letsom, dashing up. "Do come and dance with us, Johnny!"

What else could I do? Or Tod, either.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when the party separated. The waggonettes held us all, and nice scrambling and crowding we had for seats. One of the vehicles, after setting down some of its freight—ourselves and the Miss Chandlers—continued its way to Duck Brook with Jane and Oliver Preen.

It was a lovely night. The moon had risen, and was flooding the earth with its soft light. Jane sat looking at it in romantic reverie. Suddenly it struck her that her brother was unusually still; he had not spoken a single word.

"How silent you are, Oliver. You are not asleep, are you?"

Oliver slowly raised his bent head. "Silent?" he repeated.

"One can't talk much after a tiring day such as this."

"I think it must be getting on for twelve o'clock," said Jane.

"What a delightfully happy day it has been!"

"The one bad day of all my life," groaned Oliver, in spirit. But he broke into the two lines, in pretended gaiety, that some one had sung on the box-seat of the waggonette when leaving Mrs. Cramp's:

"For the best of all ways to lengthen our days
Is to steal a few hours from the night, my dear."

III.

"MY DEAR SIR,—Robert Derrick is getting troublesome. He has been here three times in as many days, pressing for ten pounds, the instalment of your debt now due to him. Will you be good enough to transmit it to me, that I may pay and get rid of him.

Truly yours,

"JOHN PAUL."

This letter, written by Lawyer Paul of Islip, came to Mr. Preen by the Thursday morning post, just a week after the picnic. It put him into a temper.

"What do Paul's people mean by their carelessness?" he exclaimed angrily, as he snatched a sheet of paper to pen the answer.

"DEAR MR. PAUL,—I don't know what you mean. I sent the money to you ten days ago—a bank-note, enclosed in a letter to yourself.

Truly yours,

"G. PREEN."

Calling Oliver from his breakfast, Mr. Preen despatched this answer by him at once to the post-office. There was no hurry whatever, since the day mail had gone out, and it would lie in Mrs. Sym's drawer until towards evening, but an angry man knows nothing of patience.

The week since the picnic had not been productive of any particular event, except a little doubt and trouble regarding Dick MacEveril. Mr. Paul was so much annoyed, at Dick's taking French leave to absent himself from the office that day, that he attacked him with hot words when he entered it on the Friday morning. Dick took it very coolly—old Paul said “insolently,” and retorted that he wanted a longer holiday than that, a whole fortnight, and that he must have it. Shortly and sharply Mr. Paul told him he could not have it, unless he chose to have it for good.

Dick took him at his word. Catching up his hat and stick, he went out of the office there and then, and had not since appeared at it. Not only that: during the Friday he disappeared also from Islip. Nobody knew for certain whither he had gone, or where he was: unless it might be London. He had made no secret of what he wanted a holiday for. Some young fellow whom he had known in Australia had recently landed at the docks and was in London, and Dick wanted to go up to see him.

Deprived of his friend, and deprived of his heart's love, Oliver Preen was in a bad case. The news of Emma Paul's engagement to Thomas Chandler, and the news that Chandler was to have a share in her father's business, had been made public; the speedy marriage was already talked of. No living person saw what havoc it was making of Oliver Preen. Jane found him unnaturally quiet. He would sit by the hour together and never say a word, to her or to anyone else, apparently plunged in what might be either profound scientific calculations, or grim despondency. It was as if he had the care of the world upon his mind, and at times there would break from him a sudden, long-drawn sigh. Poor Oliver! Earth's sunshine had gone out for him with sweet Emma Paul.

She had not been faithless, like the Faithless Emma of the song. She had never cared for anyone but Tom Chandler, had never given the smallest encouragement to another. Oliver had only deluded himself. To his heart, filled and blinded with its impassioned love, her open, pleasing manners had seemed to be a response, and so he had mistaken her. That was all.

But this is sentiment, which the world, having grown enlightened of late years, practically despises; and we must go on to something more sensible and serious.

The answer sent by Mr. Preen to John Paul of Islip, brought forth an answer in its turn. It was to the effect that Mr. Paul had not seen anything of the letter spoken of by Mr. Preen, or of the money it was said to contain.

This reached Duck Brook on the Saturday morning. Mr. Preen, more puzzled this time than angry, could not make it out.

“Oliver,” said he, “which day was it last week that I wrote that letter to Paul of Islip, enclosing a ten-pound note?”

“I don't remember,” carelessly replied Oliver. They had not yet

settled to work, and Oliver was stretched out at the open window, talking to a little dog that was leaping up outside.

"Not remember!" indignantly echoed Mr. Preen. "My memory is distracted with a host of cares, but yours has nothing to trouble it. Bring your head in, sir, and attend to me properly."

Oliver dutifully brought his head in, his face red with hanging down. "What was it you asked me, father? I did not quite catch it," he said.

"I asked you if you could remember which day I sent that money to Paul. But I think I remember now for myself. It was the day after I received the bank-note from Mr. Todhetley. That was Monday. Then I sent the letter to Paul with the bank-note in it on the Tuesday. You sealed it for me."

"I remember quite well that it was Tuesday—two days before the picnic," said Oliver.

"Oh, of course; a picnic is a matter to remember anything by," returned Mr. Preen, sarcastically. "Well, Paul says he has never received either money or letter."

"The letter was posted ——" began Oliver, but his father impatiently interrupted him.

"Certainly it was posted. You saw me post it."

"It was too late for the evening's post; Dame Sym said it would go out the next morning," went on Oliver. "Are Paul's people sure they did not receive it?"

"Paul tells me so. Paul is an exact man, and would not tolerate any but exact clerks about him. He writes positively."

"I suppose Mrs. Sym did not forget to forward it?" suggested Oliver.

"What an idiot you are!" retorted his father, by way of being complimentary. "The letter must have gone out safely enough."

Nevertheless, after Mr. Preen had attended to his other letters and to two or three matters they involved, he put on his hat and went to Mrs. Sym's.

The debt for which the money was owing appeared to be a somewhat mysterious one. Robert Derrick, a man who dealt in horses, or in anything else by which he could make money, and attended all fairs near and far, lived about two miles from Islip. One day, about a year back, Derrick presented himself at the office of Mr. Paul, and asked that gentleman if he would sue Gervais Preen for a sum of money, forty pounds, which had been long owing to him. What was it owing for, Mr. Paul inquired; but Derrick declined to say. Instead of suing him, the lawyer wrote to request Mr. Preen to call upon him, which Mr. Preen did. He acknowledged that he did owe the debt—forty pounds—but, like Derrick, he evaded the question when asked what he owed it for. Perhaps it was for a horse, or horses, suggested Mr. Paul. No, it was for nothing of that kind, Mr. Preen replied; it was a strictly private debt.

An arrangement was come to. To pay the whole at once was not,

Mr. Preen said, in his power ; but he would pay it by instalments. Ten pounds every six months he would place in Mr. Paul's hands, to be handed to Derrick, whom Mr. Preen refused to see. This arrangement Derrick agreed to. Two instalments had already been paid and the one which seemed to have now miscarried in the post was the third.

"Mrs. Sym," began Mr. Preen, when he had dived into the sweet-stuff shop, and confronted the post-mistress behind her counter, "do you recollect, one day last week, my asking you to give me back a letter which I had just posted, addressed to Mr. Paul of Islip, and you refused?"

"Yes, sir, I do," answered Mrs. Sym. "I was sorry, but ——"

"Never mind that. What I want to ask you is this: did you notice that letter when you made up the bag?"

"I did, sir. I noticed it particularly in consequence of what had passed. It was sealed with a large red seal."

"Just so. Well, Mr. Paul declares that letter has not reached him."

"But it must have reached him," rejoined Mrs. Sym, fastening her glittering spectacles upon the speaker's face. "It had Mr. Paul's address upon it in plain writing, and it went away from here in the bag with the rest of the letters."

"The letter had a ten-pound note in it."

Mrs. Sym paused. "Well, sir, if so, that would not endanger the letter's safety. Who was to know it had? But letters that contain money ought to be registered, Mr. Preen."

"You are sure it went away as usual from here—all safe?"

"Sure and certain, sir. And I think it must have reached Mr. Paul, if I may say so. He may have overlooked it; perhaps let it fall into some part of his desk, unopened. Why, some years ago, there was a great fuss made about a letter which was sent to Captain Falkner, when he was living at the Hall. He came here one day, complaining to me that a letter sent to him by post, which had money in it, had never been delivered. The trouble there was over that lost letter, sir, I couldn't tell you. The Captain accused the post-office in London, for it was London it came from, of never having forwarded it; then he accused me of not sending it out with the delivery. After all, it was himself who had mislaid the letter. He had somehow let it fall unnoticed into a deep drawer of his writing-table when it was handed to him with other letters at the morning's delivery; and there it lay all snug till found, hid away amid a mass of papers. What do you think of that, sir?"

Mr. Preen did not say.

"In all the years I have kept this post-office I can't call to memory one single letter being lost in the transit," she ran on, warming in her own cause. "Why how could it, sir? Once a letter's sent away safe in the bag, there it must be; it can't fall out of it. Your letter was so sent away by me, Mr. Preen, and where should it be if Mr.

Paul hasn't got it? Please tell him, sir, from me, that I'd respectfully suggest he should look well about his desk and places."

Evidently it was not at this side the letter had been lost—if lost it was. Mr. Preen wished the post-mistress good morning, and walked away. Her suggestion had impressed him; he began to think it very likely indeed that Paul had overlooked the letter on its arrival, and would find it about his desk, or table, or some other receptacle for papers.

He drove over to Islip in the gig in the afternoon, taking Oliver with him. Islip reached, he left Oliver in the gig, to wait at the door or drive slowly about as he pleased, while he went into the office to, as he expressed it, "have it out with Paul."

Not at once, however, could he do that, for Mr. Paul was out; but he saw Tom Chandler.

The offices, situated in the heart of Islip, and not a stone's throw from the offices of Valentine Chandler, consisted of three rooms, all on the ground floor. The clerks' room was in front, its windows (painted white, so that no one could see in or out) faced the street; Mr. Paul's room lay behind it and looked on to a garden. There was also a small slip of a room, not much better than a passage, into which Mr. Paul could take clients whose business was very private indeed. Tom Chandler, about to be made a partner, had a desk in Mr. Paul's room as well as one in the clerks' room. It was at the latter that he usually sat.

On this afternoon he was seated at his desk in Mr. Paul's room when Gervais Preen entered. Tom received him with a smile and a hand-shake, and gave him a chair.

"I've come about that letter, Mr. Chandler," began the visitor; "my letter with the ten-pound bank-note in it, which Mr. Paul denies having received."

"I assure you no such letter was received by us——"

"It was addressed in a plain handwriting to Mr. Paul himself, and protected by a seal of red wax with my crest upon it," irritably interrupted the applicant, who hated to be contradicted.

"Mr. Preen, you may believe me when I tell you the letter never reached us," said Tom, a smile crossing his candid, handsome face at the other's irritability.

"Then where is the letter? What became of it?"

"I should say perhaps it was never posted," mildly suggested Tom.

"Not posted!" tartly echoed Mr. Preen. "Why I posted it myself; as Dame Sym, over at Duck Brook, can testify. And my son also, for that matter; he stood by and saw me put it into the box. Dame Sym sent it away in the bag with the rest; she remembers the letter perfectly."

"It never was delivered to us," said Tom, shaking his head. "If — oh, here is Mr. Paul."

The portly lawyer came into the room, pushing back his iron

grey hair. He sat down at his own desk-table; Mr. Preen drew his chair so as to face him, and the affair was thoroughly gone into. It cannot be denied that the experienced man of law, knowing how difficult it was to Mr. Preen to find money for his debts and his needs, had allowed some faint doubt to float within him in regard to this reported loss. Was it a true loss?—or an invented one? But old Paul read people's characters, as betrayed in their tones and faces, tolerably well; he saw that Preen was in desperate earnest, and he began to believe his story.

"Let me see," said he. "You posted it on Tuesday, the fifteenth. You found it was too late for that night's post, and would not go off until the morrow morning, when, as Dame Sym says, she despatched it. Then we ought to have received it that afternoon—Wednesday, the sixteenth."

"Yes," assented Mr. Preen. "Mrs. Sym wished to respectfully suggest to you, Paul, that you might have overlooked it amidst the other letters at the time it was delivered, and let it drop unseen into some drawer or desk."

"Oh, she did, did she?" cried old Paul, while Tom Chandler laughed. "Give my respects to her, Preen, and tell her I'm not an old woman. We don't get many letters in an afternoon, sometimes not any," he went on. "Can you carry your memory back to that Wednesday afternoon, Chandler?"

"I daresay I shall be able to do so," replied Tom. "Wednesday, the sixteenth.—Was not that the day before the picnic at Aunt Cramp's?"

"What on earth has the picnic to do with it?" sharply demanded Mr. Preen. "All you young men are alike. Oliver could only remember the date of my posting the letter by recalling that of the picnic. You should be above such frivolity."

Tom Chandler laughed. "I remember the day before the picnic for a special reason, sir. MacEveril asked for holiday that he might go to it. I told him he could not have the whole day, we were too busy, but perhaps he might get half of it; upon which he said half a day was no good to him, and gave me some sauce. Yes, that was Wednesday, the sixteenth; and now, having that landmark to go by, I may be able to trace back other events and the number of letters which came in that afternoon."

"Is MacEveril back yet?" asked Preen.

"No," replied Paul. "The captain does not know where he is; no one does know, that I'm aware of. Look here, Preen; as this letter appears to be really lost, and very unaccountably, since Mrs. Sym is sure she sent it off, and I am sure it was never delivered to me, I shall go to our office here now, and inquire about it. Will you come with me?"

Mr. Preen was only too glad to go to any earthly place that was likely to afford news of his ten-pound note, for the loss would be his

and he knew not where he should find another ten pounds to satisfy the insatiable Derrick.

They proceeded along the pavement together, passing Oliver, who was slowly parading the gig up and down the street. His sad face—unusually sad it looked—had a sort of expectancy on it as he turned his gaze from side to side, lest by some happy chance it might catch the form of Emma Paul. Emma might be going to marry another; but, all the same, Oliver could not drop her out of his heart.

They disclaimed all recollection of the letter at the post-office. Had it been for a private individual it might have been remembered, but Mr. Paul had too many letters to allow of that, unless something special called attention to any one of them. Whether the letter in question had reached them by the Islip bag, or whether it had not, they could not say; but they could positively affirm that, if it had, it had been sent out to Mr. Paul.

In returning they overtook the postman on his round, with the afternoon delivery: a young, active man, who seemed to skim over the ground, and was honest as the day.

"Dale," said lawyer Paul, "there has been a letter lost, addressed to me. I wonder whether you chanced to notice such a letter?" And he mentioned the details of the case.

"One day is like another to me in its round of duties, you see, sir," observed the man. "Sealed with a big red seal, you say, sir? Well, it might be, but that's nothing for me to go by; so many of your letters are sealed, sir."

The lawyer returned to his office with Mr. Preen, and entered his own room. Tom Chandler heard them and came swiftly through the door which opened from the clerks' department, a smile of satisfaction on his face.

"I remember all about the letters that were brought in on Wednesday week," said he. "I can recall the whole of the circumstances; they were rather unusual."

And what Thomas Chandler recalled, and proceeded to relate, will be told next month.

JOHNNY LUDLOW.



UNDER NORTHERN SKIES.

BY CHARLES W. WOOD, F.R.G.S., AUTHOR OF "THROUGH HOLLAND," &c.



OLD GATEWAY, HALMSTAD.

A STILL unclouded sky, and all the freshness and beauty of early morning, made of Marstrand a wonderfully out-of-the-world and lovely picture.

Over the way on Cow Island the flag was flying above the long white house, and its owner having come in for a week's residence, no doubt it would be seen flying for many days to come. The harbour looked brighter than ever. Its water sparkled in the sunshine, and white sailed boats flitted to and fro.

We spent most of that morning on the ramparts, gazing upwards and outwards from our coign of vantage. Islands far and near, rising from the waters, looked

the very emblem of repose. All the surrounding sea shimmered in the sunshine, until one grew dazzled with the ceaseless flashing. Not least refreshing was the greensward on which we lounged and commanded this little world. White houses with their red roofs came out in picturesque contrast, and reminded one vividly of a Norwegian landscape. We might have been journeying to the North Cape, touching at one or other of the countless settlements at which the boat calls on her way: small islands in the sea or settlements on the mainland; a constant cruising in and out of rocks and land and water; an ever varying scene of simple and primitive life, which gives to this voyage a charm and a variety possessed by few others.

But we were not in Norway. E. would not have admitted it for a moment. Swedes and Norwegians—each to his own. We were not even in Sweden, but in an island of the Cattegat, belonging thereto. And lying idly on the cool greensward of the fortifications, the dignified castle giving a romantic interest to the scene: lying under the broad hot sunshine, life and air and a profound calm absorbed with every breath indrawn: we confessed that it would

be good to stay there for all our leisure time ; day after day, doing nothing but revelling in mere existence ; turning to a favourite book when tired of watching the clouds and the sea, the bathers and the boaters, the flirts and the sedate couples who, having outlived their youthful emotions, gazed upon the latter with a serene pity that bore witness to the nature of the soft whispers these deluded souls were uttering : the fools' paradise they had made for themselves.

And wherefore not ? Youth has the best of it, after all. A fools' paradise is better than no paradise at all. Dreams are better than prosy facts. Castles in the air raise us for a moment into happiness, and when they crumble we must escape the ruins as best we can. To watch imaginary faces in the fire is far pleasanter and more wholesome than to ponder over the cold realities of an empty grate. Therefore, in this life, let us cheat realities by living as much as we can in our imagination ; let us have our dreams, our castles in the air, our fools' paradise. Be sure the world will do its best to deceive us ; will prevent us from hugging our phantoms too closely and turning them into idols.

We agreed that it would be good and wise to spend many days here in Marstrand, in a dolce far niente existence above all others life-giving and health-restoring. But it had not entered into our plans to do this ; we had other thoughts and prospects in view. Besides : dark days would come, when skies would be overcast, and rain would fall, and Marstrand would plunge one from fields Elysian to the depths of misery. In wet weather, Marstrand, we thought, must be simply intolerable. And to-day there was something so wonderful in the atmosphere, so clear in the air, so brilliant in the sunshine, we asked ourselves if it were possible that a change was not at hand.

So we left the ramparts for the funny little streets, which more than ever seemed without plan or design ; now coming unexpectedly upon a clumsy triangular square ; now, at the end of a tortuous maze, finding ourselves in a cul-de-sac ; at the entrance, perhaps, of a small house, with the option of throwing ourselves from a back window into unknown depths of darkness and mystery, and so escaping back into this world or another : or of returning by the way we came. The latter seemed the wiser plan. Plunges into unexplored depths seldom lead even to a fools' paradise.

We visited the quaint old church, which had some black, interesting wood carving about it, and pictures fearfully and wonderfully drawn, and a small dark sacristy with a few old books, and ancient vestments that, like old lace, were probably all the more valuable for being yellow and dirty. Altogether a handsome church for this little island, dating back to the 15th century. Handsome, no doubt, for that very reason : for Marstrand, like a faded beauty, has had a past ; a history warlike and commercial, when it was of greater importance than now seems possible for so small a place. But its

prominent situation explains the mystery, and it has been called the key of the North Sea.

A youthful guide piloted us to St. Eric's Grotto, at the back of the island : a swampy marsh with a great hole in a rock, where the saint was wont to rest, and a group of trees where he walked and meditated.

A Druidical looking spot, that, instead of being on a height, like most Druidical remains, was in a hollow. Even the sea which rolled and surged within a few feet of us was hidden by rising, slippery, barren rocks, which could only be climbed by the Irish method of two steps backward for one forward. There was also a spring here : a deep well, from which our guide drew for our benefit a supply of clear cold water. In days gone by this spring was dedicated to heathen rites—Druidical or other—possibly all banished and put to flight under the dispensation of St. Eric. But of this there is no record, and here again we are at liberty to dream our dreams and draw our own conclusions. It required, indeed, no vivid imagination to picture the saint as he paced these small groves in holy meditation fancy free, missal in hand ; an aged figure and a long grey beard ; a calm eye undimmed by the passions of humanity ; a far away gaze opening to the mysteries of the unseen world. And who shall say that these mystic hermits, with minds prepared by devotion and frames mortified by fasting, were not actually nearer the Unseen than we, who, in all the hubble-bubble of existence, are taken up with the cares and riches and deceitfulness of life?

It was one of our last impressions of Marstrand. Presently the steamer came up that was to bear us away. Everyone seemed to have collected to see it arrive and depart. It came to this remote spot as a breath from the world, and departed as a messenger. The bell rang, gangways were withdrawn, paddles turned, the water splashed and foamed ; we fell away from the landing quay ; Marstrand receded. A crowd of pocket handkerchiefs waved : as natural and necessary a token of farewell in these latitudes as a handshake in England. Wherever a train leaves platform or boat its moorings in Sweden, the air becomes white with handkerchiefs frantically agitated until the last remnant of boat or train has passed out of sight of the starting point.

To-day the little crowd was no exception to the rule. White handkerchiefs—and handkerchiefs no longer white—gradually grew faint and indistinct. We passed by the deserted fortress—needed no longer since Marstrand in its decline has ceased to excite the envy of ambitious pirates. Steaming out of the harbour we saw the island no more. Inhabitants and sojourners no doubt went back to their every day life and amusements—one day so like another : and we to Gothenburg returned the way we had come.

Hotter, closer, more enervating than ever seemed Gothenburg after Marstrand. Devoutly we wished for the hour when we might leave

it for ever. Hot and tiring by day, at night yielding neither rest nor quiet. At two o'clock in the morning commenced a procession of carts, which, thundering through the streets with a noise that would have wakened the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, forbade all further repose for anyone but Gothenburg's well-seasoned inhabitants. Throughout Sweden there is something in the construction of houses or streets, or both combined, which makes the sound of anything passing down the thoroughfares so terrific, that one's very nerves jar in concert with the noise, one's ears are in danger of losing all sense of hearing. A learned engineer endeavoured to explain the mystery by showing how in some special way sound was not deadened, at the time of construction, by the ordinary methods. The cause was too technical and



HALMSTAD—SQUARE AND CHURCH.

abstruse for a novice, and remained a mystery: enough that the effect was a great reality. Like a phantom haunting its familiar, it followed one throughout Sweden, not excepting the capital itself.

I had promised to spend a day with friends living south of Gothenburg: a promise made in happy ignorance of the fact that it would entail a twenty-six hours' journey by sea and land, and a night spent at an hotel en route. My friends on their part had no idea that plans would have been formed limiting that visit to twenty-four hours. But having promised, I performed, and did not regret doing so. The only parallel case at this moment recurring to memory is that of a sixteen hours' rough drive once taken in Shetland to pay a morning call.

E. decided to vegetate the while in Gothenburg, and remained behind to revel in sea-bathing, and search out, if any existed, the hidden beauties of the town.

The boat started at eight o'clock, and was due at Halmstad—first stage in my journey—about five in the afternoon. A more perfect day never existed. More beautiful than any that had gone before, it was surely too glorious to last. So indeed it proved. For days and weeks after that, perfection as regarded weather became a remembrance of the past.

All day we steamed down the coast of Sweden. If the shores were flat and uninteresting, the very beauty of sky and sunshine, the extreme rarity of the atmosphere, invested them with a charm the more enjoyed that one felt it due to the uncertain elements. Only too often this Cattegat behaves with utter indifference to the comfort and even life of travellers at its mercy. But to-day it was calm as



HALMSTAD—PRINCIPAL STREET.

if oil had been thrown upon its frequently troubled surface. Every small object on land or sea was reflected as in a mirror. The sun beamed upon the waters in great patches of light; poured down upon the deck as if it would set all ablaze. Scarcely a breath of air stirred, beyond the slight currents of our own motion. Our little boat was called the "Mermaid," and, thanks to the calm sea, no mermaid was ever found in kindlier mood.

We steamed quietly onwards until towards midday. Then rounding a point, we turned into the quaint little harbour of Warburg, and there discharged a few passengers and a goodly cargo. It was evidently a small sea-bathing place, pleasant and quiet. In and about a casino built of wood, cool looking and quite fashionable and worldly, a few visitors lounged and idled, while listening to the strains of a band. Go where you will in Sweden, you will find an orchestra; good, bad, or indifferent. Apparently the Swedes will have music,

though it is so often not of the best. On the heights of Warburg reposed an old castle, for some reason fallen from its high estate, and degraded to the level of a House of Correction.

After about an hour's stay, scorched, almost melted, by the sun, we steamed again into broad waters. Dinner had been laid on deck, and nothing could be more charming under the sky's blue canopy. The vessel glided along without motion. In the foreground were low, green shores, mile after mile apparently deserted; given over to the gulls and whosoever might choose to make there for himself a local habitation. To all seeming, none would dispute his right. Only at wide intervals was there sign or token of life, and then it disclosed itself far inland in the shape of a small village, or settlement, with perhaps a church spire pointing upwards from out the waving trees. In its trees, Sweden has certainly the advantage over Norway. They are beautiful and well grown, and of many kinds.

But we wanted no variety this morning in our passage down the Cattegat. People and their habitations were matters of indifference. We had grander and nobler objects to contemplate. The ever-rolling sea upon the beach. Long stretches of glistening sand on which the tide broke with soothing murmurs. White shores backed by green slopes and reaches, immense extents of barren, heathlike ground, giving place occasionally to less wild, more cultivated undulations. Again, there were rocks: not high and frowning, not the haunts and homes of the wild bird: but low and polished by the action of countless ages of receding and advancing tides. To-day the water lapped gently round them, splashing and caressing, and retiring without even the energy to break into spray. But more often than not the angry Cattegat lashes itself into fury and beats and breaks upon the shores. In such a mood you will see little beauty in her, nothing attractive in land and sky. For the motion of the angry Cattegat is peculiarly restless, and few withstand her influence.

About five o'clock we passed up the Nissa to Halmstad—a fine stream, with long reaches on either side, forming a sort of natural harbour and breakwater; possessing—said the pleasant captain of the *Mermaid*—excellent salmon fishing. The town opened up, and we were soon alongside the quay: a broad thoroughfare stretching upwards beyond the bridge. All journeying was over for the present. The afternoon train had left, and I must be content with such attractions as Halmstad offered, until about seven o'clock the next morning.

These attractions were modest enough. A less exciting town could scarcely exist, as it appeared that evening. The streets were uninteresting, almost deserted. Yet it is a town of considerable population, and has a flourishing trade in the way of corn and timber. It is a seaport, and has a railway station: a conjunction of privileges certain to be utilised in Sweden to the utmost. There were no shops to speak of, or rather none worth looking at,

and Herr Öster, the landlord of the hotel—Mårtensn's—was unable to relieve the monotony of existence by speaking a single word of any other language than his own. The inn, with no pretence to anything beyond simplicity, was quiet and comfortable. Yet even here the march of progress has set its seal, and living is twice as expensive in Halmstad as it was ten years ago.

The pleasantest and prettiest part of the town was that bordering the river. Here, if you pleased, you might take an oar or paddle your own canoe, and, running up beside the Tivoli Gardens, listen to the band. This Tivoli is the rendezvous of the town, where, of an evening, people meet and repose on benches or stroll about, talk and enjoy music, all in a very unemotional, matter-of-fact sort of way. Tivoli was on rising ground, and from the brow of the hill, where you found yourself on a level with the orchestra, you had a view beyond of a small lake, which seemed the termination of the Nissa, and a large white house, reposing in park-like grounds and embowered in spreading trees.

Within a few yards of Tivoli, its little crowd and sweet strains, is the one antiquity of the town: an old gateway, massive and not beautiful, but still worthy of the honour due to great age. Some time ago a barbarous town-council decided that it only cumbered the ground and must be removed; but the inhabitants rose in a body with such determination that the council, in terror for their very lives, reversed their decision, and the gateway was saved. It is seen from far down the principal street, and gives it a quaint interest and a distinctive character.

The next morning arrived almost sooner than it was welcome. At six o'clock a watchful attendant appeared with a long, unintelligible sentence, evidently having one end and aim: to proclaim the fact that trains and tide wait for no man. But this is not quite the case in Sweden. Trains do wait beyond their time, and will even put back for anyone who may be seen struggling up a road, or frantically waving a red cotton umbrella from a distressed vehicle.

This morning it started punctually: a short train, with about three carriages and half a dozen passengers.

It was a tedious journey of about four hours, and a distance, I think, of about fifty miles. Stoppages were endless, waste of time deplorable, considering the rapidity of the age. How is it possible to realise the days of our grandfathers, who travelled by coach, and thought as much of a journey of two hundred miles as one now thinks of going round the world? They prepared for such a journey by making their wills and setting their houses in order; but who dreams of making his will on taking a trip even through the North West Passage? They must also have possessed largely another quality, those forefathers of ours—that virtue of Patience, which seems to be dying out in this nineteenth century, and will probably expire altogether in the twentieth.

It was also a somewhat monotonous journey, leading upwards through the valley of the Nissa. Yet, at times, it was very pretty. Hills, covered with fir trees, broad undulations, long stretches of green fields, giving place to thick, dark-looking forests, where wild flowers grew, and abundant strawberries—those wild strawberries that are more plentiful in Sweden than blackberries in our hedges, and that, mixed with cream and sugar, are worth a king's ransom. Beside us the river ran, appearing and disappearing in its windings; now so shallow that its rocky bed was laid bare, and again deepening where the banks narrowed. Occasionally these banks were adorned with a profusion of wild flowers and ferns. If communication with the engine-driver had been possible, he would no doubt have drawn up to



HALMSTAD.

allow one to gather them, and pluck the little red strawberries that cried out to be eaten. I do not think any of the passengers would have objected, or shown surprise. The Swedes are slow at taking in a fact, and very slow at putting themselves out of the way.

At last our station. The long, slow journey was over. On the platform a kindly face to bid us welcome. Fortunately: for the station had apparently no name, and no guard or porter attempted to supply the deficiency. One might have travelled for another four hours, wondering whether the end of the world and the station would come together.

"You have really arrived," said a pleasant English voice—and how pleasant a ring it has in a foreign country. "But you need not hurry—the train itself is not in a hurry. These slow trains never are."

It was a delightful change to the carriage that waited for us ; and we now seemed to bowl along the road more quickly than the train had run upon the lines.

We appeared to be in the heart of Sweden ; as remote from civilisation as the wilds of Australia. Not a house to be seen anywhere ; no sign of life. We were driving through an apparently endless extent of forest—fir trees, and nothing but fir trees. The sensation was inexpressibly delicious. This indeed, was forest life ; life of the forest primeval.

"I am sorry you have to go back so soon," said T. hospitably, as



HALMSTAD—HARBOUR AND QUAY.

I expressed delight at all this silence and solitude—this endless forest drive. "You have taken a long journey for a very small return."

"It is worth it all," was the only possible answer. "This is, indeed, glorious. Your lives must be passed amidst all that is beautiful and inspiring in nature. You ought, every one of you, to be perfect."

"I don't know," said T. quaintly. "It is very well for you, who come from the outer world, glad of rest and change, and contrast. But if you lived here all the year round, I think you would sometimes have more than enough of it. The solitude would become appalling ; and the grandeur, having grown familiar, would cease to charm."

"That seems impossible. The more you see of this, the more it must be loved."

"You are a born lover of the country," returned T., "and delight in all her moods and variations: and that they are delightful I quite admit. But can you imagine what it is to be shut up here for a whole winter; no neighbours with whom to exchange ideas; nature all dead around you; no singing birds or flowers; snow and ice and a searching cold that never lifts, day after day, and week after week? You would not like that."

"One can only imagine what is seen ——"

"You only wish to imagine it," interrupted T. with a laugh. "But I think your reason goes with me."

"Let the truth of your argument be proved before it is admitted."

"Then it will never be admitted, for you will never try it," said T. "You could never stand it. At the end of a month you would fly back to the world, vowing that country life, and forest solitudes, and the whole catalogue of country charms were mere phantoms of the brain; delusions to be kept for short honeymoons, or referred back to Adam and Eve in Paradise."

"Impossible," I persisted. "This is one of the greatest pleasures anyone could experience. To be driving, as we are now, through all these forest beauties; mile after mile, passing through forest after forest, and feel that it is all your own; that you are free to destroy or to build up, and no one can let or hinder you; that all this solitude is yours to enjoy for ever, and cannot be intruded upon or broken without permission—this ought to make you feel happy as kings."

"Perhaps more so," laughed T. "If we are to believe our school-books, 'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.' My head is never uneasy."

"Nor your heart," I returned, "or that laugh belies itself. You are rejoicing in the freshness and freedom of your twenty summers.—Have you ever walked from one end to the other of your property?"

"Never at one time," answered T. "It is very large. But then," he modestly added, "Sweden is not England."

Fir cones crunched beneath our wheels, squirrels ran from tree to tree, great birds flew over our heads, wondering who thus disturbed their solitude; trees took fantastic forms and shapes. Now an old trunk with withered branches looked like some forest gnome crouching from unseen evil, and now another uprose like a tall spectre with outstretched arms working spells and incantations.

At length a long, low house covering a great extent of ground came into view. A house peculiar to Sweden, almost peculiar to itself. It was only one storey high. A portico many yards wide, was supported by pillars. Round the doorway many English faces were assembled; English voices gave welcome.

It was a lonely spot, yet, like the rest of the drive, wild and solitary. One felt perfectly out of the world; as much so as anyone could feel in mid-ocean. There was no daily postman, and all letters had to be taken to and from the train. Flowers and trees surrounded the

house. Not far away was a lake with any amount of boating at command. Tall reeds and rushes bent and waved to the passing breeze. Beyond it long stretches of country; cultivated fields yielding corn and hay crops, in apparently endless extent. The distance was bounded by immense forests, where it seemed that timber might be felled yet never missed. Not far from the house, but out of sight, was an immense kitchen garden with unlimited strawberry beds; and presently a dish was placed upon the dessert table that would almost have supplied a small town. Near the strawberry garden was the ice-house, partly underground, with a sufficient supply for all possible needs the whole year round.

What could be more delightful than to explore this far away settlement? There was all the freshness of a new feeling about it, of absolute freedom. You might be as eccentric and unconventional as you pleased, no censorious world would remark thereon. You lived and breathed the pure air of heaven. The world had grown wider, mind and soul expanded with it. Town life, its limits and contractions, conventionalities and stiffness, forms and ceremonies, next door neighbours and opposite windows—all this was shaken off and dismissed, and fell from one as might fall the chains of slavery. Hereditary bondsmen are they who live in great cities.

Here was the truer life. A sky above, high and wide and blue; laughing sunshine that glinted through swaying trees and cast long shadows in the avenues, and invited one to live almost in the open air. Endless walks through field and forest. Here and there a few cottages where dwelt your dependents and farm labourers, who lived only to obey your will and till your ground. In early morning or the cool of evening, taking boat and idly paddling about the lake, watching the changes in the broad sky, the colours deepening as the sun dipped. Watching the gold-tipped trees changing to darkness, like a dying life, and gloom spreading itself over nature; and the depths of the forest turning from the cool shades of day to the melancholy of profound night. Over all, unbroken solitude; not even a far-off glimmer flashing from any window to mark the existence of other lives and domestic dramas in this solitary Eden, this boundless, charming wilderness.

"Neighbours? We may indeed say that we have none, as the word is understood in England," said my hostess. "Our only neighbour is Baron R—, and he is seven miles away. Rather a long drive for a morning call, and so our calls usually last several days. We go over and stay with them, and they come and stay with us. Even this is a delightful break in our monotonous existence. If it were not for books and letters, and the feeling that there is an outer world and that we have friends in it, who, after all, are accessible at any moment we choose to undertake a journey: if it were not for this, I think we should die of stagnation."

It was difficult to be convinced. The advantages of the world

were infinitely outweighed by all this freedom, these wild beauties, these forest sights and sounds, this sense of possession. Then there was the possibility of filling the house with friends—by far the most real of all social happiness and enjoyment.

"In summer, yes," said my hostess. "But our summers are short, our winters long. Who would stay a whole winter here? And it is worse for us ladies of the family than for the gentlemen. They may go out skating, sleighing, shooting; take long excursions; go off bear hunting, and so relieve for days together the monotony of perpetual ice and snow. We ladies must be content with skating and sleighing within limited areas. We simply vary the monotony of our winter, do not relieve it."

We were walking through a pine avenue. On the one hand was a wood leading apparently to charming depths abounding in tangle and wild flowers and ferns; on the other the lake opened out with broad fields beyond, ending in distant forests. Presently a labourer approached, and was stopped by the ladies. His expression was sad and troubled, and he had some difficulty to speak without losing self-control.

"Poor fellow," said my hostess, after he had passed on, with marks of sympathy and words of consolation; "he has just lost his only boy, a lovely little fellow of five. He took measles and was badly treated. Generally speaking, in illness of any sort, they come up to the house, but he did not do so until it was too late. Their ideas of nursing are primitive. Their manner of keeping a patient warm is to smother him in blankets, close all doors and windows, and shut out every breath of air that could possibly help to restore him. If he recovers after this, it is thanks to a vigorous constitution which will not allow him to die."

"The poor fellow seems overwhelmed with his loss," I remarked.

"He is so," replied my hostess. "He was very fond of his boy, and was a good father. He has only one girl left now, three years of age, and so the child's loss will make a great gap in the household."

"Are parents here good to their children?" I asked. "Are the households happy?"

"Yes, as a rule. But the people are simple, and their ideas are very elementary. They have few temptations in these out of the world districts; no public-houses to entice them from home and absorb their wages. But as mere labourers the men are sometimes troublesome. And, of course, they are frightful radicals; not so much politically—they are hardly up to that—as socially."

Not least interesting amongst our explorations were the visits to the surrounding buildings, out of sight of the house yet within a small radius. Immense stables; great barns filled with hay; granaries holding corn; long cow-houses with endless stalls; great saw mills, smelling of turpentine, where you might bury yourself in sawdust and revel in the swish-swish of the saw; a corn-mill with immense rollers

that ground the wheat into flour. The wheel was turned by a stream whose waters could be let loose at pleasure.

"A great place for rats," said T. "I have often wished to come across some of them, but have never done so."

As he spoke we heard a skirmish and scamper on the floor above, and immediately after, two enormous rats came gambolling down the stairs, apparently as astonished at our appearance as we were at theirs. They prepared for a precipitate retreat, but luckily we both carried a stick, and while T. despatched the one, I was successful with the other. They were monsters indeed.

"These, at any rate, have taken their last toll of our corn," said T. laughing. "To judge by their size, the toll has not been a small one. The granaries are infested with them, and would be, I believe, if we kept a whole army of cats."

The stream received the dead bodies, accorded no worthier burial, and we went our way, extending our walk through endless fields, and looking at the grazing cattle—cows with their meek and mild eyes; horses turned into a meadow, and wild in the enjoyment of space and liberty.

"How many horses have you?" I asked of T.

"About a hundred and twenty," he answered. "So you see we want plenty of food for them; great barns for the hay, and granaries for the corn. Besides that, we have an unlimited number of cows."

"True. And they must have good hay if they are to give good milk in return. What is the old saying? 'Feed a sheep with grass and it repays you in wool.'"

"One of the connecting links running through all creation," said T. rather dreamily. "We depend upon each other. 'All things in one another mingle,' does not Shelley say; 'the fountain with the river, and the river with the ocean.' So the world goes round, and thus mankind manages to make both ends meet."

The sun went down all too soon that day, and twilight with its mysterious shadows fell upon the earth. Breeze rustled and murmured in the tree tops, and bent and swayed them as if uttering majestic sentiments to which they were calmly assenting. Voices seemed to come from out the depths of the forest, which spoke to one's soul and thrilled one's very being: voices weighted with the solemn mysteries of the unknown and the unrevealed. Darkness fell and shut out the world. It was nothing now but one great abyss of blackness, sad, melancholy, awe-inspiring. But above, that dark blue vault had taken up the tale, and with its own voice declared the mysteries of creation. Stars flashed and scintillated—countless worlds fulfilling their destiny. An eternity of space, demanding an eternity to traverse, teeming with worlds known and unknown to us, seen and unseen; peopled with possibly a higher order of being than ourselves, going through more stupendous tragedies. And yet:

"He holdeth them all in the hollow of His hand, and calleth the stars by their names."

And if night came all too soon, so did the hour of final separation. The next morning, after breakfast, it was necessary to be on the wing. The horses came round, farewells were said, and we started once more for our splendid drive to the station. Mile after mile through overshadowing forests and endless solitudes. As a flash the visit had passed, and perhaps for that reason its impression was all the more vivid. It certainly left behind it a vision of calm and sylvan retreats, where life passes almost as it might have passed in primeval ages; far from the haunts of man, the rush and roar of towns, the disquieting elements of crowds, the unsatisfying illusions of society. An Arcadian existence, filled with delights, where nerves were braced, overstrained temperaments waxed serene, the heart grew light, happiness abounded, and care was only an essence and a name.

Then came the station. Afar off was the train steaming up that was to bear one away from it all. But the station-master was not forthcoming, and tickets were not to be had—so primitive is life here. However, he was approaching in that very train, and T. undertook to get a ticket whilst I settled down. This was an express train, and there would be rather less loitering at the stations than there had been yesterday. Yet we had time enough and to spare for all that was needed. A last good-bye, the whistle sounded, the train moved on. Away to the world again, whilst T. turned back to his happy Arcadian existence.

Halmstad once more. And when, about four o'clock, I went down to watch the arrival of the boat from Gothenburg, whose face should I see on board but E.'s. Tired of his solitary life, he had taken steamer for Halmstad, and, in spite of the treacheries of the Cattegat, had arrived safe and sound. For six hours we explored together the unexciting, uninteresting town, listened to the band, studied the inhabitants. Nothing particularly original rewarded us; no great eccentricities, or startling beauties, or anything far removed from the commonplace. At ten o'clock we were on board again, and the steamer started for Gothenburg.

But the Cattegat, no longer in a good humour, had lashed itself into fury. The vessel pitched and tossed like a cork upon the waves. Everything not fastened went flying in all directions. It was a terrible night, and at eight o'clock the next morning we put into Gothenburg with feelings of rejoicing. For once we felt quite an affection for the old place, and looked upon Hauglund's as a harbour of refuge.

Not long should we remain at anchor. This was Sunday, and on Monday morning at mid-day, having duly taken our berths and paid our passage, we bade a cheerful farewell to Gothenburg, and started up the Gotha Canal, en route for Stockholm.

VALENTINA.

I.

IT was a sleepy little village; an off-shoot of the bigger village (which was almost a town) two miles off; and the big village held up its head as if it were a city, and was bustling and imposing, and did not condescend to take notice of its humble neighbour. The one was known as High Marten; the other as Little Marten, an appropriate appellation befitting its obscurity. Its dwellings were chiefly cottages, standing in little plots of garden ground.

Right in the middle of the village, however, which consisted of one long, straight street, there was quite a sumptuous terrace of five houses, six rooms in each of them. And it must be observed that it is of Little Marten we are writing; the grander place is beyond our pen.

The middle house of this terrace had flowers on the outer sill of its parlour window, and a card hung up inside, on which was inscribed in round text-hand: "Miss Kettaway and Sister, Fashionable Milliners and Dressmakers"—the friendly composition and writing of the village schoolmaster. Miss Kettaway and Miss Miranda Kettaway had plenty of custom; they were accommodating ladies, and did not disdain to make homely gowns and poke bonnets as well as fashionable ones. Miss Kettaway would probably never see forty-five again; if asked her age, she might have said "thirty-three;" Miss Miranda was ten years younger, and fully meant to get married as soon as anybody asked her.

Precisely opposite this mart of fashion, on the other side the way, stood a curious kind of abode surrounded by an outhouse or two, a poultry yard, and a productive garden with a small pond in it. It might have been taken for a cabin or a bungalow, since it was only one story high; and its three rooms opened into one another. This place belonged to Jessy Moon; and she had lived in it alone since her father and mother died.

"Which is venturesome of her," Miss Kettaway remarked one day to her sister. "Girls ought not to live all alone in outlandish places no better than barns, with only a door to protect them; it's not safe or prudent."

"Girls?" disputed Miss Miranda. "You may call Jessy Moon a girl, Susan, but I don't. She's hard upon thirty if she's a day."

"She'll be six-and-twenty, come Midsummer," said Miss Susan calmly, biting off an end of thread. "But she ought to have let the place when her mother died, and taken a lodging-room."

It was a boisterous day in spring, and the windows of the cabin shook and rattled as though Jessy Moon were cleaning them. But Jessy was a mile off on her way to High Marten, her head bent

against the biting, resolute gale, her grey cloak flying out behind her like a banner. She carried a flat basket covered with a cloth, eggs lay in it and some little posies of sweet, simple, homely flowers: polyanthuses and gillyflowers from her garden beds; or primroses, cowslips, and bluebells from the wood which skirted the garden at the back. Later on she would have flowers of more importance: small tulips, daffodils, button roses, lilies of the valley, columbines, bachelors' buttons, pinks, and so on. They were put up artistically, these little nosegays, with a little white paper round their stems. Jessy was taking them and the eggs into High Marten to her customers there, as she did two or three times a week. She did not disdain any honest way of getting a living; she had but ten pounds a year certain, all told.

Her mother had been servant in a good family for many years; at her master's death she was rewarded with money, which, when invested, brought her in ten pounds yearly. She then married a fellow-servant, the head gardener, James Moon, who had also received a substantial legacy. He bought the low cabin house in the parish of Little Marten, and there Jessy had grown up. Moon took another situation, in which he earned good wages; the wife kept the house in order, and attended to their little girl. They had married late in life, and when they died Jessy was twenty-five years old. The cabin was her own and ten pounds a year, and she did her best to augment the little income so that she might remain in her home.

"It is four shillings a week," Jessy mentally calculated. "Enough to buy bread with; there are potatoes and other things in the garden, and I might boil an egg for myself now and then. Yes, I think I might manage even that way; but I mean to try to do better."

So she kept poultry and sold her eggs; and she made up the posies and found a ready sale for them; and she did fine embroidery for a shop at High Marten, and altogether was getting quietly and comfortably along.

The door of the house opened to the living room, or kitchen. That opened to a better room, which was called the parlour, and the parlour again to Jessy's bedroom. In the kitchen, on this windy day, sat a green parrot on her perch, swearing—or what sounded uncommonly like it—at the rattling windows. Its green plumage was emerald bright, the tuft on the head a glowing scarlet. A good-hearted old lady down in the village had recently made a present of this parrot to Jessy. "She's such a talker as you never heard, my dear; quite a wonderful talker; and I give her to you that you may sell her to anybody who falls in love with her; you ought not to let her go under a pound; and her name's Valentina." The truth being that the old lady, who had recently taken to attend a strict Baptist chapel, could no longer put up with Valentina's loose language.

If by chance the minister paid her a visit, that ill-conditioned bird was sure to seize on the occasion to scandalise his ears.

Valentina sat on her perch in the cabin, twisting herself this way and that, and quarrelling with the windows, when there came a modest knock at the outer door. She turned her head in the act of listening, not being quite sure perhaps whether it was the door or not. The knock was repeated more loudly.

"Who's there, who's there?" called out Valentina. "Come in and take a chair."

Whereupon the visitor naturally tried the latch. But the door was locked, and the key was in Jessy's pocket on its way to High Marten. The wind was making such an uproar, inside and out, that the applicant could only catch the sound of the words imperfectly, and never thought of the parrot.

"Oh, come in, come in; don't stand waiting in the cold; you'll catch your death," repeated Valentina.

Upon that, the door latch rattled again more violently; at which Valentina laughed until she lost her hold upon the perch, and fluttered down to the floor.

"Oh dear, I shall die! I shall die! Come in; come in, and take a chair," she called out, laughing again in her idiotic fashion, as she climbed back.

At this insult, the person outside, having found her out, walked away in anger, after asking Valentina through the keyhole whether she would like her neck wrung; for he was in a hurry and had no time to waste.

"Hang the men! they're all alike; don't trust 'em," fired off Valentina as a parting shot; though indeed a fanciful hearer might have said the first word did not sound altogether like "hang."

At that moment Miss Miranda Kettaway chanced to look out at her window opposite. She saw a light spring-cart drawn up; its white cover on it to-day, to shield from the wind the plants in pots and the choice vegetables it contained, and she saw its master turning away from his fruitless call at the cabin door. He was a very tall, fine man, with a healthy, pleasant face, and bright brown eyes.

"Susan! Susan! Do come here! There's Adam Drake calling there again! What can it possibly mean?—What can he want? This is the third time in a fortnight!"

"Calling where?" placidly responded Miss Kettaway, her mouth too full of pins to stir from her chair.

"Why at Jessy Moon's. He has got into his cart now and is driving off. What on earth Drake the Carrier can want there is odd to me. Three times in a——"

"Bother Drake the Carrier!" sensibly interrupted Miss Susan. "Don't you see I am waiting for you to measure this skirt with me, Miranda?"

Adam Drake was popularly known as Drake the Carrier. Further

up the road, beyond the village, were some nursery grounds, and upon them a great big glass hot-house filled with rare flowers, and also a compact, pretty dwelling-house. It was all the property of Adam Drake. He had gone out when a little boy to help to weed in a gentleman's garden under the head gardener, James Moon, and by dint of unflagging industry and good conduct had worked his way up in the world—which is the very best way of all ways to get up in it. He did a good trade with High Marten in his hot-house flowers, and took in every morning to the hotel there, and to one or two of the rich families, some of his fruit and choice vegetables; bringing back in his empty cart parcels for Little Marten if anyone wanted to send them. It had grown into quite a carrying trade long ago, and he had earned the soubriquet of Drake the Carrier.

Thus Adam Drake, now about six-and-thirty, was prospering in life. He was a genial, kindly-natured man, always ready to do a good turn. Many a little basket of strawberries or nectarines had he taken to the room of one who was sick and poor, many a plate of fresh green peas. Early and late he was at his work at home; and now that he could keep a man or two to help him, he did not himself often go with the cart to High Marten. When he did go he delivered the pots and the peas on his way there, and the parcels coming back, with his own good hands, just as though he had not a halfpenny in the bank. All the world liked Adam Drake. The women reproached him for not getting married, asking if he meant to grow into an old bachelor. Drake answered them that he had no time to think of a wife; and the men, with intense earnestness, said, "So much the better."

Now it was at Adam Drake that Miss Miranda was privately setting her cap. And to this end she invented no end of commissions for High Marten; parcels, small or large, which he had to bring back and deliver. When the deliverer was himself, Miss Miranda took care to be the recipient in person.

Meanwhile the wind, which rattled the casements on this fine spring day and fluttered the grey cloak, was bringing a change as the hours went on; the weather from fine became comfortless. Snowflakes began to whirl down from the sky, and speedily whitened the road and the tender young grass; and when Jessy got back home her cloak was white too. As she put the key into the door, Valentina called out her welcome.

"Come in, come in! Here you are, take a chair. Give a nut to Valentina."

Valentina meant a biscuit; but she called all good things nuts. Jessy took no notice of her as yet. She carefully put down her basket, stamped the snow off her shoes, took off her cloak and shook it, shook her bonnet, and then set light to the stove. It was a small stove, with a cheerful, open fire.

"Yes, I hear you," said Jessy, for Valentina did not cease her demands. "You must wait a bit, my bird."

Bustling about, she put the room into order. In her basket she had brought home some ducks' eggs to put under one of her hens that wanted to sit; and she hastened out to lay them in the nest, for she knew that ducks' eggs are apt to take a chill and be none the better for it. Coming back she gave Valentina a lump of sugar, and then laid the cloth for her own tea—tea and dinner in one.

She drew the round table near the stove and spread the white cloth upon it; and set out the tea-pot and a cup and saucer, some bread, butter, and a small piece of cold boiled beef. It was done quickly and dexterously, as though she were a fairy elf. She did not look unlike one, for she was very small and slight and graceful, and her face was fair, and her eyes were blue with a kindly look in them.

Valentina was treated to some sop; bread and water, well sweetened. The old lady had been used to feed her on it, and Jessy did the same.

"Not sweet! Not sweet! More sugar for Valentina."

Jessy laughed, and sprinkled a bit more; it was the usual routine when the parrot was fed. Then she sat down to her own meal.

Tea over, she hastened to clear it all away, washed her hands, and sat down to her embroidery.

A light vehicle was heard to stop outside, and a man's steps approached the door, which was then knocked at. Valentina shrieked out:

"Oh, come in, come in! Why don't you come in? Walk in and take a chair."

The door briskly opened; it was not locked now; and Drake the Carrier entered. Jessy folded her work within its tissue paper and stood up.

"Fine man! Fine man! Take a chair now."

This from Valentina. Jessy blushed rosy red, fearing Mr. Drake should think the phrase "fine man" had been caught from herself.

"I came here this morning, but the door was locked," said he.

"That chattering parrot called out to me to come in, and I thought it was you. Misleading creature! I wonder you put up with her."

"I have got used to her now," said Jessy; "and she makes the house seem less lonely."

"It *is* lonely for you here, Miss Jessy, just yourself and the four walls. Why I, up to my place, feel lonely at times, though mostly I've too much to do to think about it."

"And you have Ann Seabright to keep you company."

"Ann Seabright! Much company Ann is, poor old thing. She'll be eighty, come next winter, and the work of the house has got beyond her; takes her as many hours to tidy up the kitchen as it would a younger one minutes. She began crying yesterday and said she should have to give up."

"I am sorry for that. Won't you sit down, Mr. Drake?"

"Thankye! I haven't got time; the cart's outside. I called in this

morning to ask if I could take your basket to High Marten for you this boisterous day. And I wanted to ask whether——”

Up to that, Adam Drake had spoken pretty quickly, but now he came to a dead stand. If it was possible for a tall, strong man, who went about the world and drove daily to High Marten and back, to look sheepish, one might have thought he did just then.

“Yes,” said Jessie.

“Well, it’s this,” said he, plucking up courage. “Ann Seabright, talking of you, said she believed you’d like to get a little plain work to do now and then—trick and turn about with your fine work, she said. She can’t see well enough for it now herself; her eyes are past it.”

“Yes,” repeated Jessie. “I should be glad to get some.”

“It’s my new—shirts,” said the carrier, bringing out the word gingerly.

“Oh,” returned Jessie, blushing.

“I bought the stuff ever so long ago and gave it over to Ann. ‘Are they made yet?’ I asked her this morning. ‘Master, they’re not so much as cut out. I’m afraid to tackle the cloth, for fear of spoiling it; my old eyes won’t let me,’ she made answer; and then she went on to say she thought you might accept the job.”

“Thank you; they will be just the thing to do at night. I dare not trust embroidery to candle-light. Will you send the cloth to me, Mr. Drake, and the pattern shirt?”

“I will,” said he; “it shall come to-morrow. And I’m very much obliged to you indeed, Miss Jessie.”

Valentina had kept up a running fire of screams all the while; he was a fine man, a fine man, asking him to take a chair, telling him once or twice he was a “young devil.” Adam Drake gave her a flick as he turned to leave.

“I’m not sure but you are a she-devil yourself,” cried he. At which reproach the parrot screamed and fluttered and fell off her perch in a tantrum.

“Hang the men! They’re all alike; don’t trust ’em!”

The departing visitor, standing with the door in his hand, received this parting fling without notice. He seemed to want to speak again.

“I should like to say, Miss Jessie,” he breathed forth at last in a timid tone, “that the price to be paid for them shirts will be whatever you like to ask; not the miserable price paid by the shops. I should be ashamed of it.”

The good feeling prompting the words touched Jessie’s heart; she almost felt tears rising to her eyes.

“You are very, very kind, Mr. Drake, to say so.”

“Not at all. I like to hold to the motto, ‘Live and let live.’ Good-day. I hope we are not in for a fall of snow; it’s too late in the season for it.”

And in another minute she heard the light spring-cart drive away.

The face of Miss Miranda Kettaway opposite was glued to the window. Miss Susan had twice over told her she was waiting for that sleeve she was basting ; but she did not move.

"He's come out at last!" she cried, drawing an angry breath. "What on earth has he been doing there?"

Had Miss Miranda heard that his errand had been "shirts" she might have swooned.

II.

The cloth was brought to Jessy by Ann Seabright, together with the pattern, and an immense amount of intricate instruction from her own lips.

"I'm past fine work myself," said Ann, "and I shouldn't like to trust my fingers with the cutting out ; but I've not forgotten how good shirts ought to be made ; and be sure you take care to allow plenty everywhere for the turnings-in, Miss Moon ; leave a good margin at the gussets ; I'm not going to see him cramped in the arm-holes."

Of course it was only natural that during the process of making these essential garments their future wearer should call in to see how they were getting on. The Miss Kettaways, sitting at their window to take a short rest between the lights of an evening, saw him go in pretty often, and made comments accordingly.

"The question is—what does he want there?" asked Miss Miranda. "She must be a forward creature not to shut her door against him ; a handsome man, and all."

"Well he does seem to go pretty regular, and it can't be for nothing," allowed Miss Susan, who was never ill-natured. "I'll step over one of these odd days and warn her that folks may get talking if she doesn't mind ; she's inexperienced, you see." But the odd day never came ; the sisters just then were much "drove," as they expressed it, with the new spring costumes.

One fine morning, when the air was warm and the skies were blue, Jessy Moon put Valentina and her stand outside the door, to get the benefit of the sunshine. The window of the work-room opposite was open ; thus the ladies, stitching away behind it, had their ears regaled with the conversation of that sociable bird.

"Warm day! Valentina wants a nut. Good morning. How's Jessy? Fine man, Drake ; very fine man!"

"Did you hear that, Susan?" whispered Miss Miranda, sticking her needle for safety into the green body in process, and bending forward to listen further.

"Fine man, Drake ; very fine man. Come in ; come in and take a chair."

"There it is again! The same words ; all about Drake," shivered Miss Miranda.

"The men are all alike ; don't trust 'em."

Just then a boy, passing along with a basket, stopped to call Valentina a hot-brick and a salamander, and other refreshing names.

"A young devil, a young devil, a young devil!" promptly responded Valentina, and set on to screech and scream and shake her scarlet tuft. Miss Miranda shut the window with a vigorous hand.

"If she is not particular about her own conduct, she might at least not offend us with the ravings of that disreputable animal. I shall go over myself, Susan, as you don't go, and tell her so."

Accordingly, when dusk came on and she had a few minutes' leisure, Miss Miranda put on her gloves and a cape, and stepped across the road. The parrot had been taken in then, and the door was shut.

"Walk in, walk in and take a chair," called out that officious bird in answer to the knock.

Jessy, who had already lighted her candle and was at work, rose and opened the door.

"Miss Miranda, is it you?" she exclaimed, pleasantly. "Do come in; for so near a neighbour you make yourself quite a stranger."

"I have but little time for making calls," said Miss Miranda, loftily, accepting the seat at the little round table opposite Jessy. "Indeed I came over to-night upon what you may think is hardly a friendly errand. It is—to begin with—about that—that—unpleasant parrot," she continued, having hesitated to find an epithet not too strong, and she gave the bird a flick with her parasol, which she had carried over for gentility, not for use.

"Meddlesome old maid! meddlesome old maid!" cried out Valentina.

"We think, I and Susan, that you ought not to harbour the offensive animal, Jessy Moon. She was calling people devils, and such-like swearing, outside to-day. To polite ears it is unbearable."

"Well, I am in hopes of selling her," said Jessy, "but ——

"Wretched old maid!" screamed out Valentina.

"But Mr. Drake—it is he who thinks he has found a customer—says his friend won't be able to take her for a week or two."

"Carrier Drake—oh!" commented Miss Miranda.

"And truly I did not feel sorry to hear it; for you cannot think what company that parrot is to me," said Jessy, who had taken up her work again. "The evening hours, all by myself here, are very lonely."

"Work is always a companion," snapped Miss Miranda. "What is that you are doing? It looks like a shirt wristband."

"It is one; I am stitching it," said Jessy. "It belongs to a set of shirts which I am making."

"Who are they for?"

"Mr. Drake."

Miss Miranda strangled a virtuous cough. "Do you try them on him?" she asked, grimly.

"The wristbands, do you mean? Oh, no."

"I did not mean the wristbands; I meant the—sleeves." For she hardly liked to say the shirts, which had been the word on the tip of her tongue, the young woman looked so open and good.

"Good gracious, no. Why I could hardly stretch up to the top of his arm," laughed Jessy. "One does not need to try shirts on, Miss Miranda, as you do gowns. Ann Seabright brought me a pattern; I only had to measure it."

"It's come to a pretty pass with Ann Seabright, I should say, if she has to put her master's making and mending out."

"Old maid! Wretched old maid!" croaked Valentina.

"She is too old to see to do it," said Jessy. "It was she who asked him to let me do them."

"I should recommend you to be cautious, Jessy Moon. What with receiving men-visitors, and now taking in these—these shirts for one of them, people will ——"

"Meddlesome old maid, meddlesome old maid, meddlesome old maid!" broke out Valentina in a succession of shrieks. "Hang the men, my dear; don't trust 'em."

It was getting more than Miss Miranda's temper could stand. "Miserable infidel!" she retorted, viciously shaking her fringed parasol at the offender. "Good evening to you, Jessy Moon. I had always known parrots to be low birds, but was not aware until now that they were limbs of the Evil One." And, without shaking hands, Miss Miranda made good her escape.

"Oh, Susan, such disgraceful things as I've got to tell you!" she cried, bursting into their parlour. But her voice suddenly calmed down, for she saw Miss Jones, the schoolmistress, standing there, having her measure taken.

Miss Jones was going to be married, and had come to order her wedding gown. She and little Peterson, the chemist and druggist, had been engaged for hopeless ages, and believed they saw their way to venture into housekeeping at last.

"What's the dress to be?" asked Miss Miranda, Valentina and her insults giving place to this new interest.

"I did think of purple lutestring, but your sister here advises cinnamon brown," replied Miss Jones. "Cinnamon is a good wearing colour, as she says, and I know George Peterson likes brown when it has a tender shade upon it. So I will take your advice, Miss Kettaway. And I think I should like the skirt made in tabs; satin bows down the front and a sash behind. And you must be sure to let me have it home not later than this day fortnight."

III.

The shirts progressed to a conclusion. Jessy Moon was a quick worker; and just about that time the shop at High Marten had no embroidery to give out. Adam Drake continued to call in from time to time to inquire how they were getting on. Being for his own wear he could only be anxious upon the point.

One evening when he was there, sitting by the parrot, endeavouring to keep that screamer quiet, and looking at Jessy, who was plying her needle at the table, he began to relate a bit of news.

"Ann Seabright is going next month," said he.

"Going to leave you?" questioned Jessy, doubtfully.

"Her niece wants her over at High Marten to mind the children while she's in the shop, serving customers," said Drake. "She told me to-day that the minding of children, after the cares of my place, would be like a rest to her bones."

"Oh dear!" laughed Jessy. "But I'm very sorry, Mr. Drake. What shall you do without Ann?"

"Ann wants me to take the niece's eldest in her place, a girl of seventeen. Hardworking and capable, Ann says."

Jessy looked off her work for a moment. "Would she not be too young—for your housekeeping?"

"Well," said Carrier Drake, venturing to stroke Valentina, who was showing herself cantankerous this evening, "I thought of taking a housekeeper as well."

"What—two servants?" said Jessy, surprised into the remark.

"I didn't think of the other one, the housekeeper, being a servant, but a—a—wife," hesitated Adam, stroking the green feathers vigorously.

Jessie's thread came into a frightful tangle; all her attention had to be given to it, which in some measure hid her face.

"Her name's Sheba," went on Mr. Drake, staring at the parrot.

"*Sheba!*" cried Jessy. "What—the housekeeper?"

"No; the girl."

"What an odd name."

"It's what they call her. Christened Bathsheba, I believe."

"Fine man! Fine man, Drake!" put in Valentina.

"And I—ventured to think, Miss Jessy, that perhaps—you—you might not object to be my wife," said Drake, screwing up his courage.

Jessy collapsed altogether. She said neither "Yes!" nor "No!"

Had that particular shirt she was engaged upon been wanted for its master's hanging and must be finished against time, she could not have plied her needle quicker.

"Give a nut to Valentina," croaked the bird.

Adam Drake rose to get a bit of sugar; to do so he had to pass Jessy. He looked at her, and she looked at him. What he saw in her mild blue eyes, or she in his richer dark ones, neither of

them could have said ; but he suddenly lifted her to him and gave her a hearty kiss, for he knew he should have his wife.

"Men are all alike ; don't trust 'em," said Valentina.

Not long after Miss Jones's wedding-dress of cinnamon-brown had gone home, the Miss Kettaways found themselves called upon to make another. Miss Miranda had stepped out to try on a spencer when the bride elect called to give the order. Hearing the news on her return she sat down in a sea of consternation.

"Going to be married !—to *him* !—that Jessy Moon ! Well, she has played her cards craftily."

"I see nothing amiss in her," returned Miss Susan. "She's modest and civil speaking ; one can't say otherwise."

"You never see nothing amiss in nobody, Susan," retorted Miss Miranda, whose speech was not always on the high ropes in vexatious moments. "What's the dress to be ?"

"Grey twill, faced with same coloured silk. I made her have the facings of silk ; she wanted to say it was too grand for her. 'Not a bit of it, Jessy,' said I. 'You are going to be a good man's wife, who has a nice house and a good business, and to have a servant of your own ; you ought to have had it all silk.' And so she ought," concluded Miss Susan.

"There's that beast of a parrot outside again to-day," cried the younger sister. "Just hark at her !"

"Meddling old maid !—ugly old maid !" shrieked out Valentina from over the way. "The men are all alike ; don't trust 'em."



HEADS OR TAILS?

IN order to enable the reader to grasp the situation at once, let it be briefly stated that Miss Violet Danvers was an extremely pretty girl, and a flirt. She had lost her parents many years ago, and the various friends with whom she passed her time were accustomed to regard her as somewhat of a "handful;" nevertheless, they anticipated her visits with the keenest pleasure, and were willing enough to bear the responsibility of looking after her, for the sake of enjoying her society.

She was a very fascinating young person, small, and most delicately made, with dainty hands and feet, and a little round waist just reaching the right size for the rest of her figure. Yet, in spite of these good points, Violet's face was undeniably the best part of her, for *there* could be read as plainly as the open leaves of a book, the story of her sweet, sunny, loveable nature. Yet we have just condemned her as a flirt. Well, a girl may be that, and not wholly a reprobate, as some sour-tempered, ill-favoured, and, in most cases, "disappointed" representatives of the weaker sex would so willingly designate her. Besides, with Violet flirting was even less blameable than with many others, because she did it in such innocence, and so entirely without any *arrière pensée* in the matter. She was young, she was beautiful, she was rich, and she accepted all the attention which fell to her lot accordingly, as naturally as a queen bee receives the homage of her faithful subjects.

And yet, though women are so proverbially vain, there comes a time in every true woman's life when she learns to care more for a single token of regard from one individual than for fifty such from other admirers.

Violet Danvers, when she arrived at Oxford on the Michaelmas Term of 188—, had not yet limited herself to the favoured *one*. But she was decidedly tending that way, for she no longer felt the slightest interest in the undergraduate race of mankind, whereas she entertained the very strongest regard for the two sons of her host—the head of St. Stephen's College. The puzzle was, which son to choose? She had every reason to believe them both to be her willing slaves. Indeed, it was obviously an open and well understood contest between the two brothers; and they were each so attractive in their widely different stages, that, considering Violet was a young woman with a liking for everything which is worth having, from lovers down to strawberries-and-cream, it was no wonder she hesitated in making her final decision.

Cecil, the elder son of Dr. and Mrs. Hamilton, was rather above the middle height, slightly built, with a physique which told of his

indoor tastes and studious habits ; an impression which was confirmed by a single glance at his delicate, finely-cut features. His eyes were large, soft, and dark, and the long dark hair falling over his pale forehead completed his faultless representation of the æsthetic genius of modern England. His passion was music, and he had so long and faithfully wooed the art, that his friends had begun to believe she was always to remain his only mistress. But the truest devotee is yet human, and when a young and beautiful woman comes across his path, he is just as likely to fall in love with her as the ordinary run of mankind.

Now, Dick Hamilton—thank Heaven ! as he often said to himself—was a very ordinary young fellow. He only happened to be a fine specimen of a style of man which has done a vast deal more than it ever troubles to recollect for the English nation. Very tall, he was powerfully and splendidly built, active, athletic, perfectly healthy in mind and body, with a frank and open countenance, and a cheery, ringing voice, which had made him one of the prime favourites, not only in his own college, but in the whole university. Of brains he had just enough to enable him to take his degree, due time being, of course, allowed for the process ; but then, other and more important matters than book work absorbed his attention. He was president of the O.U.B.C., he rowed in his college races as well as in the 'Varsity eight and at Henley Regatta ; he was a member of a very popular club in the university ; and, in fact, took such a prominent part in the sport and amusements of the place that his young admirers were apt to say :

"Oxford may as well shut up shop, when the Babe (the name by which he was familiarly known) goes down !"

And he had fallen in love with Violet Danvers !

But to return to the visit which the said young lady paid in November, and which both brothers decided must be the finish of the race they were running.

Cecil decidedly gained the first point by being disengaged on the afternoon of her arrival, and able to meet her at the railway station, and escort her back to college. Dick was obliged to be down at the river, looking after a freshman's college regatta, and Cecil had matters entirely his own way.

"It is really pleasant of you to have decided on coming down to us just now," he said in his soft, languid voice, as he sat by her side in his mother's drawing-room, whilst together they sipped Indian tea and nibbled daintily rolled up wafers of bread and butter.

"Why just now?" Violet asked.

"Because I hope you will consent to be one of the audience at my 'musical exercise' next week."

"I cannot promise until you explain to me what you mean by a 'musical exercise,' which to the ordinary mind has a painful savour of schoolroom pianos and compulsory practising."

"It is the performance of an original cantata called 'Death and his Bride,' which I have written for the degree of Mus. Doc., and shall conduct in the Sheldonian Theatre."

"You have really written it yourself? Oh! I am so glad, because it's so interesting to know authors and composers and all those sort of people."

"Your presence in the theatre will help me, I am sure," said Cecil, in still lower tones; "for the strain of the undertaking is almost more than I can bear. I know that my music will not be understood. To perform it to an ordinary mixed audience is worse than setting pearls before swine. If they applaud at all, it will be in the wrong place, or they may clap the mere beauty of the voices, or the technical skill of the instrumentalists. But the meaning, the soul of the work, that which, coming from me, has taken with it a part of my very life, is hid from their eyes! You will understand it, Miss Danvers; you will reckon the price I have paid for this, the first original creation of my brain."

Violet hardly knew how to answer this rhapsody, but she was under the spell of his dark eyes and pathetic pleadings, as with a sigh almost as sad as his own, she said:

"I will do what I can for you, I will help you when and where I can."

At that moment the door opened and Dick Hamilton came in, seeming to bring with him a breath of fresh air into the heated, sweet-scented atmosphere of the room. He greeted Violet with genuine pleasure.

"Well, now, I do think it's awfully good of you to come down to us at such a beastly time of the year as this! Though I dare say it's not much worse in Oxford than anywhere else. Do you know you have got it most frightfully hot in here, mother?"

"We do not feel it, my boy," said Mrs. Hamilton. She was a mixture of both her sons, and loved them quite impartially, but she was obliged to show some consideration for Cecil's health, which was far from robust.

"Ah, well! I know it's a wicked habit which people who come into a room from out-of-doors have of grumbling at its heat. Now Miss Danvers how much tea have you left me? Plenty, I hope, for I give you fair warning I'm mortal hungry."

And Dick, with two long strides, came to the tea-table, took up the teapot before his mother had time to reach it, and shaking it contentuously, said:

"Tisn't good enough. I'll ring the bell and have a good big cup of cocoa. What have you got for me to eat, mother? Only those mouthfuls of bread and butter. Oh! I declare this will never do! You wait until I invite you to tea in my rooms, Miss Danvers, and then see what a good square meal we make of it! Cope," to the butler who answered his summons, "make me a cup of cocoa, will

you, as quickly as you can, and bring in some cake or buns or something or other intended to satisfy a man and not a pigmy."

"Wasn't it very cold down at the river?" Mrs. Hamilton asked, to divert her big boy until his hunger should be by way of being satisfied.

"Cold? No, of course not! It's sitting indoors over the fire that is cold work; you never hear a man grumble when he's out-of-doors and moving."

"Those trees in the garden," said Cecil irrelevantly, turning from the window out of which he had been gazing, and speaking to Violet Danvers: "those trees are types of the most glorious colouring! I never remember seeing the autumn tints so golden and red as they have been this year."

"Types! why 'types?'" interposed Dick. "But I will tell you what, Miss Danvers: I'll take you out in my Canadian canoe up the Cherwell (I believe I can manage it to-morrow morning), and then you will see the trees and types and all the rest of it to perfection, and have the additional pleasure of being in a boat along with me."

This last remark was made very playfully, and in a manner which could hardly have offended the most cross-grained critic.

"My dear boy," said his mother, "you must remember that other people are not so enthusiastic as you on the subject of boating, and that to the ordinary mind ——"

"Miss Danvers' is not an ordinary mind, and I cannot think how you can dare to call her such! Now, please bear me out in my assertion," turning to Violet, "and accept my offer with alacrity."

"I do, Mr. Hamilton, for my own credit as well as yours."

This bantering seemed a foolish waste of time to Cecil, and he rejoiced when an engagement to dine out obliged Dick to go and dress, and left him once more in possession of the field. The evening was all Cecil's own, and he spent the greater part of it in leaning quaintly over the back of a chair and airing his peculiar views for Violet's especial benefit. When it began to get late and Violet might have proposed going upstairs, he sat down at the piano and played to her for more than an hour with exquisite taste and feeling, and without a single note of music to help him in the production of these sweet sounds. No wonder that when Violet fell asleep that night her head was full of superlatives, and in her dream she lived over again all the queer, sad, beautiful ideas which Cecil had sought to instil into her. She was too young yet to know how strained as well as how strange these new creeds must ever be.

The next morning at breakfast, Cecil was quite silent, though this lassitude should in fairness be attributed more to nervous exhaustion than to laziness. Dick, like all thoroughly healthy people, was quite as "fit" in the morning as at any other time of the day, and after giving his audience a very funny account of his dinner the night before, and of "the stunning good songs which some of the fellows

sang after it," he asked Violet if she would be ready for the canoeing at eleven o'clock; and punctual to the minute his good-tempered head appeared at the door, just as all the bells in Oxford were chiming the hour.

They set off alone together across the park to the private boat-house on the upper reaches of the winding Cherwell. If anyone is inclined to question the propriety of this young man and this maiden starting on an expedition together, let him or her please to remember that a Canadian canoe does not conveniently hold more than two persons.

Whilst Violet lingered on the banks, Dick hurried into the boat-house, unslung and carried down to the river the light birch canoe, and arranged the cushions luxuriously along the bottom of it: adding an extra warm fur rug for Violet to sit on and another to wrap over her—which he had thoughtfully brought with him for the purpose. Then he paddled down to where she was waiting, and helping her to step daintily into the canoe—a very necessary precaution unless you mean to have an impromptu bathe—they started up stream.

It was a glorious autumn morning, and Violet lying back upon her cushions most thoroughly enjoyed herself. Of human beings there were none in sight, but of life there was plenty. First, a moor-hen rose startled from her bed of reeds and rushes; then a gaudy kingfisher darted down stream in search of his dinner; a wagtail sat upon the bending boughs of a willow tree and surveyed the world timorously from his own point of view; and a water rat, frightened by the faint sound of the paddle, dived out of danger into the soft mud of the bed of the river.

Dick was a most expert paddler and amused himself by steering the canoe within an inch of the bank and never touching it. Sometimes he issued a sudden command to "Duck your head!" And then Violet, who was so low down before in the boat she scarcely imagined herself capable of shrinking any more, would nevertheless obey orders somehow or other, and notice that her little soft hat had narrowly escaped being carried away by a big over-hanging bough.

"What puzzles me," she said after one or two such experiences, "is, what becomes of you!"

And she looked back at her great tall companion.

"Oh! I'm pretty clever at telescoping up; I've had a good deal of practice in that way, you know." And then Dick chatted away and told her, innocently and without a suspicion of conceit, about a great many other things of which he had considerable experience; finishing up his long eulogium upon boat racing in general with the remark:

"The College fours are on next week. I do hope you will come down to the river and see them."

"Are you rowing in them?"

"Rather!"

"And shall you win?"

"A race is never won until it's over, that's a certainty; but I am not going to turn prophet."

"Well, I will come down and see it, if you will promise me to win."

"That is a big bribe to offer any fellow, but I accept it!"

A sudden silence fell upon them both, and much as she had enjoyed her paddle it was with a feeling of relief that Violet espied the boat-house just ahead, where the business of landing and of putting away the canoe, completely unloosed their tongues and dispelled all shyness. Still Violet could not forget the feeling which had come over her, of having stepped dangerously near the edge of some unknown depths, and for the future she determined to avoid as much as possible solitary expeditions with Dick Hamilton. As for Dick he returned home in the highest spirits, and with the natural confidence of his sanguine nature, indulged in the belief that his prize was already won.

But in the afternoon Cecil had his innings when he escorted Violet Danvers to listen to the service at Magdalen Chapel; he had only been able (he said) to obtain two tickets necessary for admission, and nobody demurred at their starting off alone together.

The verger placed Violet in one of the big stalls, and Cecil took care to seat himself in a favourable position opposite. In the beautiful, dimly-lighted chapel, listening to the soft strains of the organist, the musical intonation of the chaplain, and the unique perfection of the singing of the choristers, Violet forgot the joyous, active, noisy world, in which Dick Hamilton so exclusively rejoiced, and for the present lived in a shadowland of strange yearnings and unsatisfied desires. When the service was over the two lingered in the ante-chapel listening to the voluntary, and, it may be, silently enjoying each other's society, whilst Violet made up her mind that she was in quite as much danger with Cecil as with Dick.

And thus the days passed on. First, Dick would arrange a sailing expedition upon the floods which covered the meadows bordering the "upper river;" and then Cecil would bring home tickets for the inaugural lecture of the new Slade professor. "Though," he said ruefully, "what can we expect but disappointment after Ruskin?" Another day Dick carried off Violet to watch an Association football match in the Parks, which she found rather dull work; but Cecil capped this treat by taking her to the meeting of an amateur string quartette, which she found duller still!

Meanwhile, each of the brothers was perfectly content in the firm belief that he was to be the happy winner of the coveted prize. Of course it was very wrong indeed of Violet thus to trifle with their feelings, but what was she to do when she could not tell her own mind? It was no pleasure to her to vacillate between two magnets, and she would have been a great deal more at her ease if only her love affairs were satisfactorily settled; but though the decision rested entirely with herself, she was altogether unable to make it.

At last matters reached a climax, when the two brothers proposed to her on the same day ! But she cut the Gordian knot with true womanly ingenuity by refusing them both. They knew she did not mean such cruelty, and when they pressed her, this is what she said :

"Let me wait until you, Cecil, have performed your cantata, and you, Dick, have rowed your race, and then I will tell you which of you I will choose !"

For, like Portia of old, Violet determined now to decide her fate by pure chance, vowing solemnly to herself that she would marry the man who made the best impression on her, when, in such widely different ways, each sought to display his skill.

After this proclamation, Dick spent the whole of the few remaining afternoons on the river, rowing desperately hard himself and encouraging the others in his boat to do likewise ; for clearly if he lost the race he had no chance whatever : while Cecil devoted all his time and energies to rehearsals, and at the last moment managed to make arrangements with some of the very best London professionals to come down from town to undertake the solo parts.

His day of trial arrived the first : and according to arrangement, punctually at half-past two Mrs. Hamilton and Violet walked over to the Sheldonian Theatre.

The place was apparently already crammed, for rumours had been circulated to the effect that Mr. Hamilton's "exercise" would be no ordinary one, and most of the wives of the college dignitaries, besides a crowd of townspeople, had assembled to hear it—undergraduates were chiefly conspicuous by their absence. Places had been reserved for Mr. Hamilton just by the state chair of the Vice Chancellor, whose duty it is—however unmusical his tastes—to listen solemnly to the "exercise" from beginning to end : but he had not come in yet.

Presently a good deal of clapping announced the arrival of the "musical judge," a picturesque looking old man dressed in a most gorgeous gown of white and crimson silk, who sat down at one side of the raised platform, and, on being presented with a copy of the full score carefully followed every note of the music, as became a judge ! More clapping, and Cecil came in, bâton in hand, wearing the purple-and-black gown of a Mus. Bac., and looking intensely pale and eager. He was followed almost immediately by the Vice Chancellor, to whom from his elevated seat, he turned and made a most courteous bow, which the Vice Chancellor returned with due ceremony. Then Cecil gave one hurried, involuntary glance at Violet and turning his back upon his audience, proceeded to conduct the performance.

If Violet had been a more acute musical critic, she might have better appreciated the subtle harmonies with which the cantata undoubtedly abounded, but even her simple tastes were fully gratified. It was quaint, original, and in some parts melodious ; and watching the quick eager motions of the conductor, and the excited trembling

of his left hand as he raised it to urge the choir to emphasise a sudden "forte" or dropped it for a "piano," she felt what a wonderful thing it was to have created such a work; and what a still more wonderful thing it was that the author of it should have fallen in love with her own insignificant self.

In about an hour, amid rapturous applause, the "exercise" came to an end, and Cecil, whiter even than before, turned again to make his second formal bow to the Vice Chancellor. Then the "musical judge" came forward and heartily shook hands with and congratulated the young composer, and they left the platform together, while the cheers still rang through the building. It was a proud moment certainly for Cecil Hamilton, and yet he cared more for Violet's first glance as he met her outside the theatre, than for all the applause within it. She was very quiet, and something perilously like a tear glistened in her soft eyes.

"Tell me now?" he asked, in a voice this time low, not from affectation, but from emotion.

"I cannot—we must wait."

Yes, wait. Cecil knew well enough what for; but he did not have to wait long, for the boat race was rowed on the following day.

It was cold, but fortunately a fine afternoon, and Mrs. Hamilton, with the double object of chaperoning Violet and of seeing her son row, consented to come down to the river, though very few ladies put in an appearance there for the fours. Dick accompanied them as far as the 'Varsity barge, where he left them comfortably established on the roof under the care of several of his friends, who promised to answer all the questions which Violet as an uninitiated spectator was sure to ask. The river was a pretty sight. At first it was full of boats—tub pairs and fours and scratch eights, for Michaelmas is the term for coaching the freshmen—all hurrying back to their respective college barges to be out of the way before the fours came on. Then, as the course began to clear, the banks became alive with a crowd of flannel-clad undergraduates, hurrying across the river in punts, that they might run up the towing-path towards Iffley (where the boats started), their terriers at their heels and a general amount of life and good humour about them which was invigorating even to witness.

"There," said young Montague, standing at Violet's elbow; "do you see that boat in the distance starting from the 'Varsity boat-house? That's 'St. Stephen's' going to drop down to Iffley. They won't be off for a quarter of an hour yet, for the Derby boat hasn't even left its barge. Do look how beautiful a racing four looks after these clumsy tubs you have been trying to admire. There are only two boats in for the fours this year, the others all scratched several weeks ago. It ought to be an awfully close race, and with all my heart I pity Hamilton having to steer them."

"But Mr. Hamilton isn't *cox*!" Violet exclaimed, with indig-

nation. That settled the point for good and all ; she never would marry a man who was only a cox.

"Rather not ; at least, not the kind of cox you mean. These are the coxswainless fours, you know, and one of the men has the ropes under his feet and steers looking back and keeping as straight a course as he can. But it's killing work, I can tell you, and likely to be heart-breaking work, too, when to be taken a yard out of one's course may mean losing the whole race."

"Why have they made Mr. Hamilton steer?" Violet asked, this time with anxious sympathy.

"Why? Because he's a long way the best man for it, and for anything else, too. Derby is the stronger crew, but all the betting is on St. Stephen's, just because Hamilton's in it."

Violet felt her cheeks tingle with pleasure ; this unanimous popularity surely told its own tale.

"Which is the winning post?" she asked next.

"Well, there are two. The river is a bit narrow for racing in some parts, and so the boats start one of them twenty yards ahead of the other ; and the first boat, if it means to win, has to reach that post over there," pointing to the right, "before the second one reaches here just in front of us. It's a bit hard with twenty yards between them to judge which is really ahead during the race, but a gun will be fired as soon as it's won. *Hullo!* Why they must have started!"

Violet could not possibly tell how her companion came by this piece of information ; for though the opposite bank had been almost deserted for some time—most of them having run up towards Iffley—of course the boats were a long way out of sight, and not even a sound of cheering reached her listening ears. But Montague, with quick and knowing eyes, had espied that on the distant bridge of Iffley, of which he could just discern one grey arch, the crowd had begun to move from left to right ; and in a few moments, to confirm his statement, a faint sound was heard by them both. It grew louder and louder, this shouting of the enthusiastic undergraduates as they ran along the bank. Then the foremost of them came in sight ; and at last, to Violet's intense excitement, first one boat and then another appeared round the corner.

"Derby has the first station ; and, by Jove ! it's a close race !" was Montague's first exclamation.

Violet fixed her eyes intently upon the second of the two boats, in which already she fancied she could discern her lover. Some of the spectators on the barge, not being able to calculate to a nicety the distance of twenty yards, kept saying :

"Oh, Derby is winning easily ! They are walking in !"

Indeed, it seemed to Violet as though the distance between the two boats was greater than it ought to be, but she held her tongue, and Montague kept saying :

"By Jove, it's a close race ! But we shall win it yet !"

The steering was admirable. St. Stephen's came along as straight and as steadily as though the most expert cox were giving his whole attention to the work; so did Derby, until within fifty yards of the winning-post, and then, in an unlucky moment, they turned a shade out of their course into the middle of the stream. May be, this slight error decided the race, or they were more rowed out than their opponents; at any rate, before ever they reached the further winning-post a gun, fired by the umpire, announced that St. Stephen's had passed the nearer one. The race was won!

Then the cheering and shouting and even yelling, of the St. Stephen's men upon the bank, became almost deafening, even out-of-doors! They threw their caps in the air; they stamped, and waved, and screamed: "Well rowed, well *rowed!* well rowed, Hamilton!" And generally testified their gratification with that young intensity which, alas! we most of us lose all too soon. Violet could hardly refrain from shouting with them, she felt so glad and excited; and when Derby, according to established etiquette, loitered about for St. Stephen's to row leisurely by before them, and Dick, from his proud position in the winning boat, looked up deliberately to the barge where she was standing, she felt the blood mount even higher to her cheeks, and her pulses beat quicker and quicker.

As soon as ever he could manage it, Dick escaped from the college barge and rejoined the ladies, who were waiting for him. His mother and Montague walked on in front, and, very leisurely, he and Violet followed them through Christ Church meadow, whilst he asked her once again if she could not love him and promise to be his wife.

"Yes, Dick," in sweet, faltering tones, "for you have won me, as assuredly as you have just won the race!"

Cecil bore his disappointment well, and in course of time married a studious Girton girl, with whom, if he did not accomplish much for the music of the present, he became a very faithful apostle of the music of the future. And moreover he made her a most suitable husband, which he never would have done to Violet Danvers.



WITH US STILL.

On the moorland wild and barren, where few sounds of life may be,
 Where the tall grass waves in whispers, like the murmurs of the sea,
 Sinks the sun in clouds of sadness that a weary day is told
 On the wrinkled brow of labour: and the night is dark and cold.

Not the plover's parting clamour, not the owlet's note I hear,
 Not the wind amazed and frightened on the moorland dark and drear;
 But the sound of many voices and the feet that leave no tread,
 Coming thus to meet me homeward—they, the legion of the dead.

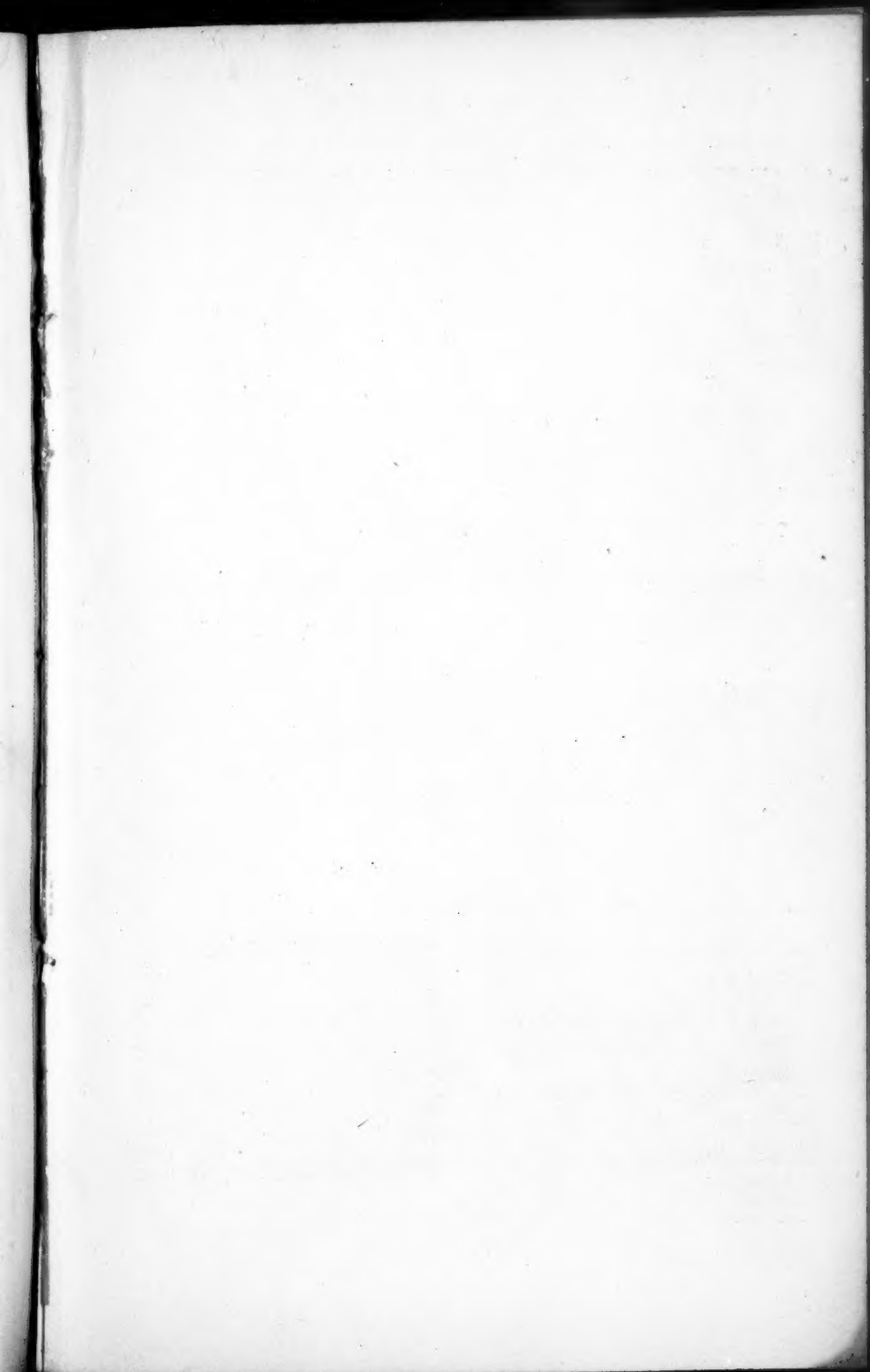
Some with bright and youthful faces—ah! I knew them well of old;
 For we parted in the morning when the east was tinged with gold,
 When the air was light with gladness, and the earth was white with
 flowers,
 Ere the bitter Tree of Knowledge cast its shadow on the hours.

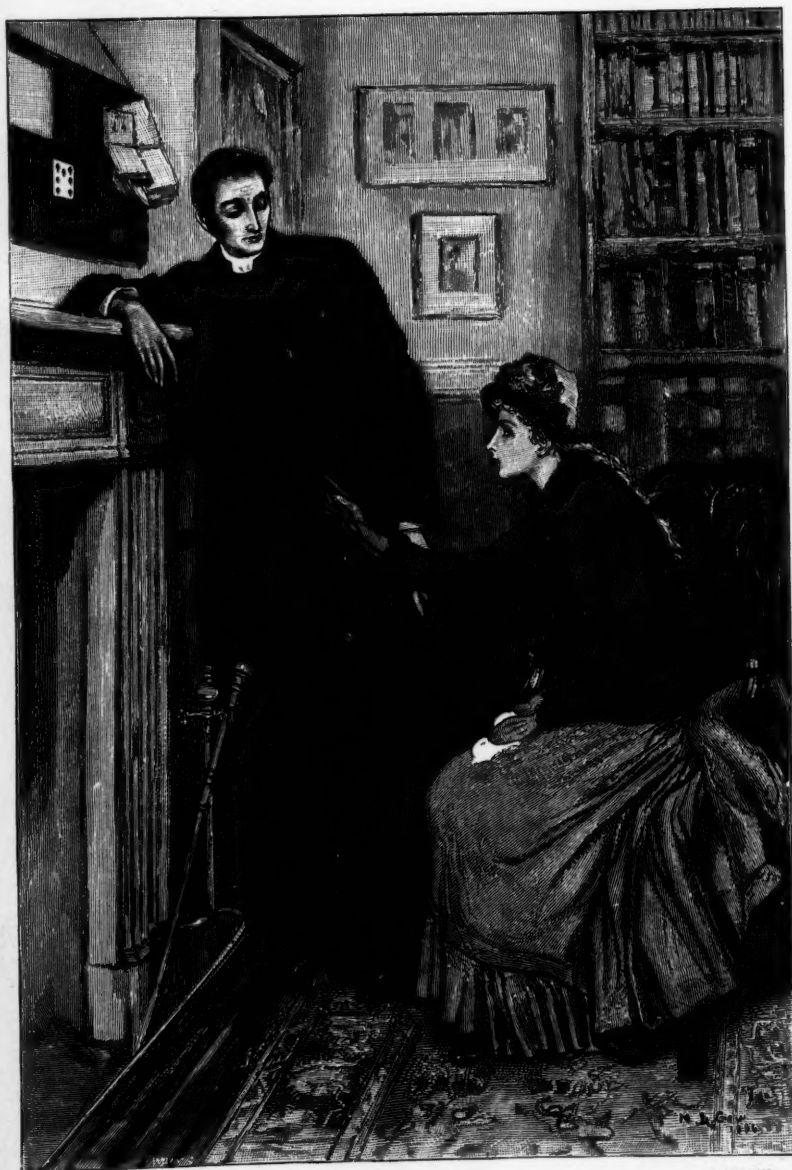
And some who held our trembling hand with tearful look and fond,
 As they crossed the chilly river to the land so dark beyond,
 And we bent to catch the whisper, that they saw through mist and
 chill,
 The light which lights the cheerless soul ere the weary heart is still.

And the dear ones in the sunlight of our home, our stay and guide,
 Working with us in the vineyard till the call at eventide,
 Smiling yet as they once did smile when we watched the brief adieu,
 When we went our way with weeping till their presence came anew.

And ever on the moorland wild, I hear their hurrying feet,
 And ever when the sun goes down the nearer when we meet;
 For I feel bright eyes are watching long, beneath the starry dome,
 And the voices in the darkness here would bid me hasten home.

C. J. LANGSTON.





M. L. GOW.

J. SWAIN.

THE SEVEN OF SPADES.